Chapter 7: French Symbolist Poetry

Poetry turns all things to loveliness — Shelley: Defence of Poetry

The pioneer of Symbolism in French poetry was Gérard de Nerval, a contemporary of Musset and Gautier. A born dreamer, circumstances conspired to drive him into intermittent fits of lunacy, during one of which he wrote the sonnets for which he is famous. His efforts to see the 'hidden links of distant and divergent things' and to write about them foreshadowed Baudelaire's belief in 'correspondances'. In the evocative quality of his verses he was the forerunner of Mallarmé, and his method of putting conflicting images and allusions together and making the poem grow out of the union has become one of the striking features of modern symbolism. He heralded the great age of symbolist experiments in French poetry, but his novelty proved too great for contemporary critics to digest. They dismissed him as a lunatic and it was left to another, occasional lunatic, Arthur Symons to discover his true greatness.

During the periods of lunacy Nerval seemed to obtain a deep understanding of life. Everything around him seemed to have been transfigured and every object was a symbol revealing its meaning to him. And out of all this he found 'unknown harmonies come forth'. He was convinced of the sensitive unity of all nature, and he became one with nature. In 'Le Rêve et la Vie', he wrote:

All things live, all things are in motion, all things correspond: the magnetic rays emanating from myself or others traverse without obstacle the infinite chain of created things; a transparent network covers the world, whose loose threads communicate more and more closely with the planets and the stars.

Nerval had arrived in his own way, at that philosophy of 'correspondances' which Baudelaire was to express in systematic form later.
As can be expected, there is great unequalness of quality in Nerval's works: this is one of the reasons why he cannot be regarded as one of the major poets. He had no doubt real visions of an ideal world, but these visions were not always transformed into poetry. He lived in solitude, and the world of practical affairs seemed to be very far from him. This was more so because he spent the day in sleep and the night in dreams. His dreams gave him a strange sense of exhilaration, which increased during the periods of madness. Madness affected him as opium and hashish did some others: it created the receptivity for vision, so that 'the soul sitting safe within the perilous circle of its own magic looks out on the panorama which either rises out of the darkness before it, or drifts from itself into the darkness'.

Though he called his madness 'the descent into hell', because images came crowding into his mind, he had a strange confidence during these spells which made him happy:

At times I imagined that my force and my activity were doubled; it seemed to me that I knew everything, understood everything; and imagination brought me infinite pleasures.

At such times Nerval seemed to be deeply concerned with cosmic problems in which he had an important role to play. 'My own part', he says, 'seemed to me to be the re-establishment of universal harmony by Kabbalistic art, and I have to seek the solution by evoking the occult forces of various religions'. He had moments of mystic vision almost like Blake's excursions into 'innocence'. But he was an unsystematic mystic, and he lacked the spiritual discipline and imaginative energy of Blake. A true estimate of Nerval as a poet has been given by Arthur Symons, when he writes:

Wavering among intuitions, ignorances, half-truths, shadows of falsehood, now audacious, now hesitating, he was blown hither and thither by conflicting winds, a prey to the indefinite.

2 Ibid., pp.15-16. (Quotation from Nerval's 'Le Rêve et la Vie').
3 Ibid., p.16.
4 Ibid., p.15.
Though Nerval did not give us a systematic account of his visions or a philosophy like Blake's, he was no doubt the first poet in French to create poetry out of his dreams. For the first time he used words for suggesting moods, words as ingredients of an evocation, to create an atmosphere. In his poems he tried to convey the transcendent beauty he had seen in his dreams, and to do this he realized, poetry had to be something of a miracle. The poem was not to be a song addressed to beauty, not a description of beauty, nor a reflection or copy of beauty, but 'beauty itself, the colour, fragrance, and form of the imagined flower as it blossoms again out of the page'.

Vision came to him like an overpowering flood, and he knew that the poem was to grow out of the vision. Vision had taught him Symbol, and he knew that it is by symbol alone that the truth he got through vision could take visible form. He knew that the whole mystery of beauty can never be comprehended by the crowd, and that while one must aim at a clear style, being perfectly clear and explicit did not, by itself, make poetry great. Imagination could enable the poet to see and experience things which the poet cannot convey easily and directly. Having this power, the poet could say with confidence:

J'ai rêve dans la grotte où nage la sirène.

That vision could not be described but only suggested. It was this suggestiveness that was developed by later symbolists.

Nerval's sonnets represent a fresh departure from poetic practice in another way. In these poems the poet does not write about personal experiences, nor does he describe objectively things which he considers outside himself, but gives that reality in which the poet and his dreams have become fused into unity. Nerval's poetry therefore can claim a truthfulness which makes it far different from the vaguely suggestive,
dream-like poetry that we find sometimes in Verlaine. He deals with a real theme, namely his vision, boldly and directly, but the very nature of his subject is such that explanation or discursive rendering is not possible. In a poem like 'El Desdichado', full of complex allusions and striking contrasts, he suggests the complex state of mind of one who feels he is living in a world apart:

Je suis le ténébreux,— le veuf; — l’inconsolé,
Le prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie;
Ma seule étoile est morte, — et mon luth constellé
Porte le soleil noir de la mélancolie.

Dans la nuit du tombeau loi qui m’as consolé,
Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d’Italie;
La fleur qui plaisait tant à mon cœur désolé
Et la treille où le pampre à la rose s’allie.

Suis-je Amour ou Phébus, Lusignon ou Biron ?
Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la reine;
J’ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la sirène...

Et j’ai deux fois vainqueur traverse l’Achéron,
Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d’Orphée
Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.

The title, meaning 'the disinherited', is taken not from Spanish, but from Scott's 'Ivanhoe', in which a mysterious knight bears on his shield the words 'El Desdichado'. Nerval identifies himself with that knight as with 'the Aquitanian Prince of the abolished tower', thus also referring to the ancient family of the prince, from which Nerval claimed descent, a family whose arms were the 'Three Towers Argent', but whose titles of nobility were abolished during the Revolution. The complex allusions serve to emphasize and create the mood of solitude and despair of the poet. The poem thus symbolizes and evokes a certain state of mind in the poet.

The first inspiration for Symbolism, however, came not from Nerval but from a foreigner, the American writer Edgar Allan Poe. This unproclaimed genius made a strange but powerful impression on Baudelaire.
Some temperamental affinity made Baudelaire take great interest in Poe's writings, which he translated into French. Many critics have been surprised at the fascination and the influence that Poe exerted on the French Symbolists. One of the reasons given for this influence is the imperfect understanding of Poe's writings by the French poets. But Poe, misunderstood or half-understood, represented for them the ideal poet, and the lecture on 'The Poetic Principle', delivered on two occasions in his own country and not taken seriously on either occasion, became a sort of sacred text for the Symbolists. They traced to this lecture and to the essay 'On Poetic Composition' the aesthetic principles they themselves wanted to follow. The principle of 'pure poetry', the dedicated role of the poet in society who pursued his sacred vocation in the face of hostility from the 'hydra-headed public', the importance of the unconscious in poetic creation, were all ideas inspired by Poe. It was Baudelaire who first made most use of these ideas. His insistence on the autonomy of poetry, for instance, was derived by him directly from Poe's essay on the "Poetic Principle", which, surprising as it might seem, has had a fortune in France that makes one think at times of the role of Coleridge's "Biographia Literaria" in English romanticism. But most of all, there were two developments encouraged by Poe which had the greatest significance for Symbolism. They were the aspiration of Symbolist poetry to approach the perfection of form represented by music, and the determination of Symbolist poets to convey the 'Idea', or essence of the vision. The Symbolists tried to live up to these ideals.

When we turn from Poe's theorizing to his practice, we are even more surprised at the admiration of the French poets had for him. As a model, Poe's poetry has greater disqualifications than the crudities of its technique. In conception as in execution, much of his poetry is immature and unworthy of being placed...
beside the work of the Symbolists. The recognition by the Symbolist poets of Poe as their master, and the respect they show for him makes us wonder, and we cannot help agreeing with Prof. Mansell Jones when he writes about their attitude towards Poe's poetry:

... How then could Baudelaire, and forty years later, Mallarmé, reach and reiterate their conviction of his 'crystal' quality, its purity? That is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the whole problem: it raises the question not of the notion of 'pure' poetry derived from 'The Poetic Principle', but of the example of 'purity' found in the poems themselves. With the best of Blake and Coleridge in mind, can we expect to think of Poe as the exemplar of the pure poet?

Baudelaire gave as a reason for his admiration of Poe that he was the typical 'aristocratic' artist, the poet who dominated his work, and who invariably strove to produce work that was perfectly finished in accordance with high, self-imposed standards. This was not true of Poe as an artist, while it was truer of Baudelaire himself. But Baudelaire tried to live up to the high standard, the ideal example which he thought he found in Poe.

We are not concerned here with what Poe really was as a poet. The Symbolists' worship of Poe might have been the product of a misunderstanding, but it was, as T.S. Eliot has remarked, 'a fecund misunderstanding'. The French Symbolists found little in their own past history or tradition to support the new ideas, and perhaps it was this which induced them to look for support further afield. They found suggestions in Poe's critical statements and poetry which helped them to systematize and formulate their own ideas about poetry. It was in this manner that Poe was most useful to the Symbolists. Baudelaire was not only a great admirer of Poe, but one who assimilated and made most use of his ideas.

With Baudelaire we come to a poet of great power and genius, brought up in the tradition of the Parnassians, but attempting to overcome the limitations of the group and striking out boldly in new directions. What
he achieved was left to posterity to judge and to value. Perhaps, when
his work is viewed in the context of later developments, Baudelaire may
seem to have broken little fresh ground; but he did things which were novel
and powerful enough to give
new enough to shock his contemporaries. He gave French poetry a new direction, a new
impetus, a new voice. And he touched upon many ideas and ways of doing
things which have remained characteristic of poetry ever since.

'Les Fleurs du Mal', on which Baudelaire's poetic reputation chiefly
rests, is a collection of one hundred and thirty-two poems, on diverse
themes and in diverse styles. But the collection is not like a string
of beads, a number of poems put together under a common title; as the
author himself has warned us, 'this is not simply an album'. Those
who seek, however, for a general design, an architecture giving a sense
of unity to the book, may be disappointed. The poems are not made to
share any common characteristics, nor are any technical devices used
to create an impression of interconnection. Yet the book does produce
a harmonious impression: it has the unity of life. That is perhaps
why Marcel Proust wrote, that in the country of Baudelaire's genius
'each separate poem is but a fragment'... which as soon as one reads it,
joins up with the fragments we already know, until an entire landscape
has been created that gradually fills the reader's mind'. Each poem
symbolizes a certain experience of the poet, and each poem is an
example of meticulous craftsmanship. In spite of the reputation
that Baudelaire has for opium and hashish, these are not effusions
of intoxicated genius, but carefully worked-out pieces. The poems are very appropriately dedicated to the 'Poète Impeccable', Théophile Gautier, that master-craftsman and worshipper of work well-done. The book seems to have made a powerful impression on contemporary poets. Victor Hugo, on receiving a copy of the poems wrote to Baudelaire: 'Vous avez doté le ciel de l'art d'on ne sait quel rayon macabre; vous avez créé un frisson nouveau.' This new effect — a strange, new feeling of horror — seems to have been achieved through a disconcerting union of a refined art with morbid matter. One indeed feels 'the heavy, heated temperature with dangerous hot-house scents in it, ... the sharp and cruel enjoyments of pain, the acrid relish of suffering' that Swinburne detected in Les Fleurs du Mal to be their most marked characteristic. The first impression we get from these poems is of a Villon-like poet revelling in a 'Parisian dream-underworld in which the criminal and the courtesan rub shoulders with the grave-digger'. But before you get to this world, 'you have to pass through rooms of incredible dilapidation tenanted by moustached harpies, fungous alleys haunted by cats, boudoirs rancid with rotting flowers'. This gamey atmosphere of evil is Baudelaire's most immediately striking feature, and it seems to justify the poet's reputation for Satanism. Baudelaire's 'satanism' is however a complex problem. It may have been part of the Romantic revolt of the opening years of the nineteenth century, a sort of Promethean protest against the established order. In it were all the disgust and irony of those who no longer believed in heaven or in hell, and who, 'confronted with a climate of tragedy and a solitude which they could not bear, hastened to laugh about them and about themselves for fear they might burst into tears'. His own experiences in life made Baudelaire feel that he was struggling against some ironic, adverse force. He knows that this experience

10 Joseph Chiari : 'Realism and Imagination', p.164.
is shared by others in the world, others whom happiness eludes. He voices revolt in their behalf against this state of things; but he does not sermonize or moralize. He only struggles, and claims companionship in suffering with the reader, whom he addresses in hardly complimentary terms:

Hypocrite lecteur — mon semblable — mon frère.

Man is in the habit of deluding himself and others by hiding his unhappiness; he is a hypocrite in this as in his refusal to face the truth. The poet revolts against and casts off this hypocrisy, in order to seek the reality, and he is prepared to accept the reader as a companion in this quest. Baudelaire's revolt may thus be regarded as a quest for truth.

Jean Paul Sartre has explained Baudelaire's revolt or 'satanism' as a refusal to accept God. 'He suffered because he was unsatisfied', but his suffering did not, as Sartre views it, drive him into action. His protest did not take any positive form. 'He did not challenge Good; he did not transcend it; he simply found it unsatisfying'. He just wanted to wallow in despair, and hence his preoccupation with the evil. This interpretation of Sartre does not satisfy. If Baudelaire's revolt had been mere ennui or impatience with Good, it could never have had the creative force or power, of which the poems are clear proof. Baudelaire's protest has a more positive character, and it is not directed against Good, but against the tyranny of evil, a tyranny to which man submits because of the inherent weaknesses in his nature. This weakness is described by Baudelaire in a well-known entry in his diary:

There are in every man at every moment two simultaneous aspirations, one towards God, the other towards Satan. The urge towards God, or

11 Jean-Paul Sartre: 'Baudelaire', p. 95.
The urge towards Satan is a 'joy' that attracts and deludes man, who finds it very difficult to resist it. Only knowledge of the truth can give him the power to resist it. Impelled by a Faustian urge for knowledge through suffering, Baudelaire experiences Evil, and reveals it in all its varied aspects.

Evil, in the poetry of Baudelaire, is not the metaphysical abstraction that is the opposite of good, but something real and particular. It is presented in all its gruesome, physical reality. It becomes something almost tangible. Its presence is felt by our senses.

Baudelaire begins with evil in one of its most common aspects: as it manifests itself in contemporary urban life. The city of Paris, which was passing through a process of rapid and increasing industrialization became, for him, the symbol of evil and the suffering resulting from evil. Hence his apostrophe to the city:

"Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
Où le spectre, en plein jour, raccroche le passant."

Paris, the inexhaustible modern city, was for Baudelaire what nature had been for a Romantic poet like Lamartine. Incapable, as he admitted, of 'shedding tears over vegetation', he could find in the sights and sounds of Paris the inspiration that other poets found in 'meadow, stream and grove'. The light that filtered through the rain and fog blended with the noise and dirt of the city, to give it a nightmarish atmosphere, a fit setting for all the sins and ills of the people. Baudelaire was,

12 Charles Baudelaire: 'Journal Intime'.
13 From the poem 'Les Sept Vieillards'. The lines could be translated as:
Swarming city, full of nightmares,
Where the spectre, in broad daylight, strikes the passer-by.
perhaps, the first French poet to write about modern urban life. He concentrated upon the Parisian scene and wrote about it in spite of many things that he detested, perhaps because he detested them; for, in writing about these, the spleen he was nursing in his heart found an aesthetic release. The nightmarish atmosphere with which he invests the city was perhaps suggested by the tales of Poe: it helps the poet to give a lurid intensity to his subjects. The fantastic effect of horror that Baudelaire succeeds in creating brings to our mind Dante's Limbo and Eliot's wasteland.

In adopting the contemporary scene as a theme for his poetry, Baudelaire made a bold departure from the general preference of the writers of the time for remote and romantic subjects. His practice was also a refutation of Taine's view that art should express the 'stable' characteristics of life. Baudelaire wrote about the 'ephemeral' aspects of life, drawing upon the humblest details of Parisian life, to create a sense of the 'heroism' of modern life. The passing joys and sorrows, the struggles and the failures of modern man, have a greatness of their own. This sort of outlook gave Baudelaire a reputation that he found even ugly things beautiful. This is not quite true. He only felt that the poet could discover beauty even in what appear to be ugly things.

But most of all, Baudelaire felt it was necessary to write about ugly and unpleasant things in order to get nearer truth. The sordid city imagery we find in his poems is given not merely to show the contrast with the splendour of the past, but to help us have a closer look at reality in all its stark ugliness. For instance, Baudelaire writes about the evening hour — about whose beauty so many poets have
sung — as approaching the city on soft wolf-tread, 'comme un complice',
and bringing about a bestial metamorphosis in man:

Et l'homme impatiente se change en bête fauve.

The change is emphasized by the deepening darkness, darkness which brings
the gas lamps flickering in the wind, and all the drama that is played
in this lurid light:

La Prostitution s'allume dans les rues;
Comme une fourmilière elle ouvre ses issues;
... Elle remue au sein de la cité de fauge
Comme un ver qui dérobe à l'Homme ce qu'il mange.

Several workers start their night's rounds: the cooks, the dancers
and the music, all selling entertainment to jaded appetites.

Cheap Hotels, the haunts of dubious comforts, are filled with discontented
people: crooks and tarts and thieves rub shoulders. The poet thinks
of these outcasts of society, and of the sick and ailing for whom this
hour is one of great discomfort:

C'est l'heure où les douleurs des malades s'aigrissent;
La sombre Nuit les prend à la gorge; il finissent
Leur destinée et vont vers le gouffre commun;
L'hôpital se remplit de leurs soupirs...

Paris in the evening makes the poet conscious of all the misery of
destitutes and of those unhappy people who are neglected by society.

Paris in the morning is no happier, as rubbing its tired eyes it wakes
early, like an ancient drudge, to another day's work. 'Seldom have
the pains of life been described in more expressive imagery' than in

14 = conspirator-like.
15 Cf. Eliot's 'one-night cheap hotels'. ('The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock')
16 The quotations are all from Baudelaire's 'Le Crepuscule du Soir'.
17 Peter Quennell: 'The Sign of the Fish', p. 20.
Baudelaire's poems. Indeed, the poet seems obsessed with the squalor and sin of contemporary life and he sometimes revels in morbid imaginings. Poems like 'Le Voyage à Cythere' and 'La Charogne' show a preoccupation with the gruesome, though some critics have seen it as a 'self-consciousness about the macabre and the gruesome in order to shake the bourgeois'. But in most of his poems there is also a strange sympathy for the sufferer, and a keen interest and joy in the unpleasant and the ugly. That was perhaps why Laforgue remarked: 'Baudelaire is well-behaved. He is courteous to the ugly'. However, even when Baudelaire wrote about the commonest or the most unpleasant subject, his manner was somehow lofty and superior. It is something like Yeats's dignified manner even when dealing with the most ordinary subjects. Even ordinary things are transmuted in Baudelaire's poetry, and they become meaningful, significant in a larger way. Indeed, Baudelaire's greatness is not due to the fact that he writes about the contemporary scene in a realistic manner, but to the fact that he makes it symbolic of something more universal; his poetic art turns the ephemeral into the timeless. As Eliot writes in his essay on Baudelaire:

It is not merely in the use of imagery of common life, not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the first intensity — presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself — that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men.

Baudelaire showed by his own example that great poetry could be made out of even the dregs of urban, industrial civilization. There could be poetry, if only one knew how to find it, in the worst aspects of life. It was possible for Baudelaire to make his themes assume larger meanings because he had a deep understanding of

human suffering. His 'recognition of the reality of sin' in life and
his familiarity with evil, enabled him to have a vision of reality,
since evil is as much part of life as good. Baudelaire showed a complete
acceptance of the harsh realities of the sensuous world, of the ugliness
and bitterness of life; and yet he had the power to transcend all
this. Out of his own suffering and despair — which comes out
in a line like: 'Ne cherchez plus mon coeur, les betes l'ont mange' —
he created symbols. It was the intensity of his suffering that gave
him the perception of good and evil, which as Eliot says, is 'the
first requisite of spiritual life'.\textsuperscript{19} In this understanding of evil we
may compare Baudelaire with the mature Yeats, who discovered that 'we
begin to live only when we have conceived life as a tragedy'. Baudelaire's
writings about evil and suffering may also bring to mind Villon's and
Dante's visions of evil. Like all great poets, Baudelaire was occupied
with the struggle — which alone constitutes life for a poet — to
transcend his experiences, and to transmute his personal and private
agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal.\textsuperscript{20}
In this he did not always succeed. Baudelaire's symbolization of evil
is often marred by a Byronic self-pity and self-glorification, and a
confusion of evil with its 'theatrical representations'. The
Dantesque vision was free from all traces of rhetoric, personal
commentary and self-consciousness. With Baudelaire we also feel
that at times he enjoyed his composition more for the effect it produced
than for its depth of feeling or its truth. But when this sort of

\textsuperscript{19} T.S.Eliot: 'After Strange Gods'.
\textsuperscript{20} T.S.Eliot: 'Selected Essays', p. 137.
self-consciousness was absent, Baudelaire created poetry of a high order. For instance, in a poem like 'L'Albatross', Baudelaire has tried to give a true symbol of his own suffering at the hands of an unappreciative public. The albatross in this poem is not a mere image or metaphor, like Musset's pelican or Vigny's wolf; it moves away from their conceptualism. The poet and the albatross are not so much juxtaposed as fused into one concrete object which carries the full meaning, and which nevertheless could not be fully understood without reference to the idea that it clothes. On the contrary, the pelican could not be confused with the poet. The albatross is very close to being fully the poet: the intellectual framework has been partially withdrawn, leaving only the living symbol. But the albatross does not become fully a symbol; there is not that fusion of perception and idea which we expect in a true symbol. When the poem ends, with the line:

Ses ailes des géant l'empêchant de marcher.

we remain unconvinced. What he says may be true of the albatross, but not of the poet. The hooting crowds do not restrain the poet from rising upon his giant wings. Also it is not that the poet, unlike the albatross, cannot walk, but that he would not walk. Thus the albatross remains on the level of the image: it does not attain to a full life of its own. This is not true of Baudelaire's symbolization in 'Le Cygne'. In that poem the poet seems to become one with the swan, and its suffering becomes his own. The poem opens with the poet's observation of a swan, who had escaped from his cage in a Paris menagerie and was

... dragging his white plumage on the rough ground
Opening his beak beside a dry gutter ...

The sight is pathetic, and the poet begins thinking of its suffering
in alien surroundings. This piece of harsh reality evokes an experience.

The poet thinks of Andromache, widow of Hector,

Auprès d'un tombeau vide en extase courbée ...

and of the negress, wan and phthisical, seeking

Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard,

and of all those who are seeking in vain, thirsting for the waters of life.

The poet finds a correspondence for this spiritual condition in the symbol of the swan. The poet's yearning for life, his spleen, is a like spiritual state. The beauty of life — dynamic and strong — is denied to the poet, imprisoned as he is within the dull round of a humdrum existence, surrounded by the ugly details of the Parisian scene. He does not get what he wants: the ideal beauty. His condition is, therefore, symbolized by the white swan, heavenly bird, frotting the dusty, dirty city pavements.

Art is what gives meaning to all things. The dissatisfaction, the ennui of the poet finds a fitting symbol in the swan. The poem itself is a composite of poet and swan, of suffering and pity, whose meaning,

... is an intermediary between the present thing (= the image of the swan) which supports it and the absent object which it designates; it retains within itself a little of the former and already points to the latter. ... It does not exhibit itself; it holds itself back, vacillates a little, and is only accessible to the keenest senses.20

These words of Sartre form a fitting commentary on the poem of 'Le Cygne', though they are used by the author in an altogether different context.

As in this poem so with the others, the poet makes symbols out of his own suffering, contemplates his restlessness and misery, and finds his fate bound up with two factors: Time and Spleen. Both have an ironic

The poet is obsessed with a sense of hurrying time, of the minutes which tick by inexorably. The anecdote seems very likely which tells us about Baudelaire having stuck a notice over the face of his clock, announcing in English, 'It's later than you think'. Poems like 'L'Horloge' and 'Remords Posthume' symbolize this obsession, and recall in a way, that sense of urgency, remorse and inevitability that we find in Marvell's verses:

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near.
And yonder, all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song. Then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity;
And your quaint honour turn to dust
And into ashes all my lust.
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

But Marvell's ironic contemplation of time is followed by a fierce and gaiety and enthusiasm for life which is far from Baudelaire's sense of finality and irremediability. Marvell's poem ends on a note of joyous hope:

...Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness into one ball,
And tear our pleasures, with rough strife,
Through the iron gates of life.
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run!

That sort of hope was unknown to Baudelaire. On the other hand, he found time only emphasized the helplessness of man. Opposed to the ceaseless ticking of the unforgiving clock was the 'fastidious monster' Spleen. Spleen is the title of four successive poems, which evoke for us the
mood of ennui that the poet suffers from. Spleen is one of the dark forces paralyzing virtue, activity, life itself. These two forces — Time and Spleen — acting together create in the poet, and by extension in us, the sensation of being stuck, when it is essential to advance. That condition, a typical modern situation, the poet tries to evoke by means of various symbols: a nightmare whirlpool, the Polar icescape, an endlessly descending staircase, the (mesmeric) serpent eyes of conscience. All these become a symbol of that evil which we find in the poem *L'Irremuable*.

But what Baudelaire ultimately leaves us with is not a sense of self-defeating and sterile despair. The poet is also aware of the beauty and the joy that life can give. The poet is not lost in his pessimism; there is, on the other hand, a full acceptance of all that life means. The poet finds himself divided between the horror of life and an ecstatic awareness of the joys of living. The tension of his violent struggle impelled him to write; he sought relief, temporary as it may be, in the fullness and order of his symbols. And in creating these symbols he rendered an ecstatic, disinterested tribute to the bewildering beauty and diversity of life. Therein lies his greatness as a poet.

His love of life, his joy and zest, finally triumph; he seems to have learned to accept life, with all it means. In spite of all its evils, life was worth living. We might find a parallel in Tolstoy's sensuous appreciation of the world of the flesh, even though it was in perpetual conflict with his sense of sin, derived from nameless emotions of fear
and anxiety. Baudelaire's title 'Les Fleurs du Mal' itself suggests how closely his love of life was linked with his sense of evil. Spleen
and Ideal — horror and ecstasy — brought him a vision of truth. He
made the symbolic voyage to eternity, the journey through the boredom
and horror to the glory of life, and looked into the abyss, 'le gouffre'.
He had now attained the power of penetrating 'into the beyond, and of
translating its mysteries'. In this way the poet fulfilled his high,
symbolic purpose of reaching "L'Ideal". Inspired by the mysterious
and undying attraction of the Ideal, the poet created poems symbolizing
his vision of truth, translating spiritual meanings into images of the
spiritual physical world. The poet thus became interested in
'Correspondances' as conceived by Swedenborg, and he began looking for
the hidden meanings behind material things. He became the interpreter
of the 'forest of symbols', and found that Nature was full of deep realities.
His famous sonnet 'Correspondances' suggests at least two lines of
thought. Nature is no longer something to be enjoyed merely for its
physical beauty, its visual charm. It is to be regarded in a different
way: it is important because the mind of man understands it. If

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissant parfois sortir de confuses paroles :
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers. ...

the relation of man with nature is important, and the intuitive vision
of the meanings of the objects is something greater than the objects
themselves. Baudelaire believed in the mysterious relation between
man and nature which enables us to see the 'correspondances' between
the objects and their spiritual meanings. Thus we get a better understanding
of life and truth.
The sonnet also suggests Synaesthesia, or the correspondences between various sense-impressions. That was the basis of Baudelaire's view of the community of all arts. There was also the correspondence between the sense-impression and the 'idea' or essence, because of which evocation or symbolization was possible. The realization of this correspondence was necessary for all artists. Inspiration came to the artist from his contact with the ultimate reality (the 'idea'), and artistic creation thus became a spiritual activity. The experience or the vision was the same for all artists; each artist rendered the vision in his own particular artistic language, whether this was painting, sculpture, music or poetry. Inspired by this belief in the unity of all arts, Baudelaire tried to find the symbolical correspondences between one art and another which could make possible the creation of one unified art capable of expressing them all at once:

An artist who had such an ideal before him, and who freed himself from the necessity of recording natural forms ("exterior reality") discovers his senses become keener and keener. The artist may then devote himself completely to the ideal, and in this devotion he may develop the power to create new sensual forms and combinations:

C'est en effet à cette période de l'ivresse que se manifeste une finesse nouvelle, une acuité supérieure dans tous les sens. L'odorat, la vue, l'ouie, le toucher, participent également à ce progress. Les

21 Charles Baudelaire: 'Richard Wagner et Tannhauser à Paris'.

An experiment in making such correspondences between different senses impressions is the following poem by Baudelaire, in which he has attempted to combine various effects into a sort of harmony which would be able to give a complete experience:

_Harmonie du Soir_

Vàici venir les temps où, vibrant sur sa tige,
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un ensensoir;
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir;
Valse mélancolique et languoureux vertige!

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un ensensoir;
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige;
Valse mélancolique et languoureux vertige!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige,
Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se figne ...

Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige ...
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir!

The poem symbolizes the melancholy of a disappointed lover. The poem is in the form of a 'symphonie sensorielle' in which visual images, sounds and smells all meet. The sounds and the perfumes seem to be waltzing like figures; the sound arranges or orders the images, and the pain is suggested by the perfume.

Synaesthesia was only one aid in the evocation of the indefinite; it was one way of bringing out the mystery and the spiritual experience of the poet. The sensual images in the poem could each evoke a feeling, and all these were organized into that complex evocation of experience.
which is the poem. Thus the poem becomes a true symbol of the experience. The poem is musical in the sense that it is like a harmonious unity of sensations. This use of synaesthesia is to be distinguished from Verlaine's attempted use of 'correspondences' to illustrate or suggest feelings directly. A poem like Verlaine's 'Chanson d'Automne' would illustrate the point. In Verlaine's poem, conventional symbols are used; we have images like the deep-tolling bells, white fountains sobbing in the moonlight, and songs in a minor key. The bell which sounds the hour brings sad memories of former days, the poet drifts with the wind-like a dead leaf, and the whole scene vibrates with the sounds of nature's violins. Verlaine too had a symbolic purpose. He wanted to capture the elusive qualities of existence glimpsed in moods of languour and melancholy. The images convey vague emotions which help us to approach the Idea. The external aspects of nature given in the images of the poem suggest the mood of the poet. The symbols of Verlaine are really no more than metaphors or images, a means of clothing the 'idea' in sensible form: even for this purpose they prove inadequate. Confirming to the patterns of external nature, these images keep the poem confined to the actual, and allows only a limited comprehension of the forces which the Symbolists were interested in.

Not content with this approach, they wished to convey if not the 'idea' itself, at least some of the qualities or aspects of the deep reality. In this way the Symbolist was primarily interested in that which could not be directly expressed, but had to be suggested. No amount of explanation can bring to us that sense of awe and comfort, of the mystery that is in the relation between man and nature, that we find
symbolized in a poem like Baudelaire's 'La Grande'. The poem expresses the poet's relationship in personal, sensual images, but the relationship ultimately becomes symbolic of the relation of man with mother Earth.

That deeper meaning, the 'idea' or mystery behind things was the goal of the Symbolist. The quest itself, the quest for the ideal, was part of the experience symbolized. Baudelaire sees his own quest as a symbolic voyage. He gave a new turn to the traditional concept of voyage. The importance given to exterior reality is abandoned in favour of an imagined voyage:

Nous voulons voyager sans vapeur et sans voile ...

It was not a geographical voyage, but a voyage in which time and space are concentrated to the minimum. The voyage is divested as much as possible of physical movement, and the explorer is freed little by little from external stimuli and horizons, and he is surrounded by such landscapes as will reveal a changed relationship in regard to nature. The object of this imaginative voyage is, according to Baudelaire, the unknown, 'le gouffre'. The unfathomable abyss (le gouffre) is foreign to the physical nature which we ordinarily know through the senses and the reason. In the pursuit of that Unknown, the poet was prepared to take any risks: 'Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?'.

Baudelaire's journey was a journey to a 'moment of consciousness', a moment when a fusion of present experience and awareness of experience takes place. From that 'moment' he contemplates 'le gouffre'. But he is never lured away into dangerous depths from which no return is possible. Baudelaire never relinquishes his firm foothold upon earthly reality. The abyss did not claim him; he did not become a victim like Nerval. Nor did he get transfixed on the brink, refusing
to look back, like Mallarmé. To Mallarmé, 'le gouffre' became identified
with nothingness, and he became obsessed with the idea of annihilation.
Reality as we know it has to be abolished; in doing this, Mallarmé reached 'nothingness'. Out of 'le noue'
Knowledge of the unknown was for Baudelaire the means, while to Mallarmé
the poet was to create a new reality. While to Baudelaire 'le gouffre' remained a mystery, Mallarmé attempted
it was the end in itself. The difference comes out when, for example,
intellectual mastery was it.

we compare the manner in which the same symbol — that of the swan (le
cygne) — has been used by the two poets. In Baudelaire's poem the
bird thirsting for water symbolizes dissatisfaction and desire; it
suffers, but accepts the realities of the situation. The swan of
Baudelaire is part of the world we know. Mallarmé's swan escapes
altogether from the world as we know it into the region of the ideal:
it fades into nothingness. Mallarmé's poem gives the impression of being
something ethereal, something floating above the earth, unconnected
with and unconcerned about, mundane affairs. The poem reaches the
ideal of autonomy: it comes nearest being a complete mind-created
structure.

Mallarmé's sonnet on 'Le Cygne' has been considered a masterpiece of
symbolic structure and method. The poem, for all its polished appearance,
is a daring experiment in form. There is a subtle metaphorical
indirectness: the use of words is suggestive rather than discursive.
The words suggest without stating, 'brushing against reality' as Charles
Mauron calls it. This effect is achieved mainly with the help of two
devices:

1. The use of abstract words to direct our attention away from
the concrete and the external. The symbolic image of the
swan is surrounded by words which are not only abstract but
strongly suggestive of the immobility and lifelessness, the
frozen qualities of abstraction itself;
The imagery is purposely inexact, either because only a few, incomplete brush strokes are given, or because of irregular or difficult construction, as in lines 9-14 where there is a breaking up and telescoping of syntax. The images do not clarify or illuminate, although strong sensuous impressions are created.

The sonnet is a very carefully constructed piece, with all its peculiar sound effects and imagery. The slightly syllables in '-i' shine through the sonnet like hanging icicles: every line ends in this vowel. Albert Thibaudet sees in the '-i' sound the power to evoke a sense of the vastness and coldness of monotonous white space. The poem itself has a deceptive elegance:

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui
Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre,
Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
Le transparent glacier des vois qui n'ont pas ful

Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui Magnifique, mais qui, sans espoir, se délivre
Pour n'avoir pas chanté la légion où vivre
Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui.

Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
Par l'espace infligée à l'oiseau qui le nie,
Mais non l'horreur du sol où le plumage est pris,
Fantôme qu'a ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris
Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne.

The poem does not make itself understood immediately. However, an attempt to sketch the action of the poem as it concerns the swan, may be made. The poem begins with the beginning of a new day — pure, cold and beautiful. What freshness and beauty can be liberated by the day? The question suggests to the poet, the possibility of liberation of a
bird, who flapping his wings might fly away from the water which is rapidly freezing. But the day may also develop in some other way: its purity may turn into frigidity. The wings may beat, but the bird may not rise. The bird, which the second quatrain reveals as a swan, thinks of past and future. It could have flown away before it got encased in the ice; it might get completely immobilized if it remains thus. The swan is fully aware of both these aspects of the situation, but it makes up its will to remain where it is. The water freezes; what was once an element of freedom and movement changes into a prison. The swan gets caught in the ice, but its neck, still above the water, is free. It is yet able to shake off the frost that is forming. A silent combat follows between the whiteness of the swan and the whiteness of winter, both contributing to the spectral atmosphere of the wintry landscape. The swan itself becomes a spectre when its whiteness merges with the whiteness of snow and ice. Only the knowledge of the swan that it is being crushed remains to distinguish it from ice and snow. It thinks this exile from happiness into hardness and immobility may well be useless — it could have gone elsewhere. But this exile emphasizes the swan's inner strength: the capacity to look with scorn upon suffering.

Such a sketch may help us to get at the first layer of meaning in the poem. There have been a number of interpretations of the poem: each has its merits, but each is necessarily incomplete. The poem is as symbolic of the swan's condition as it is of the poet's. The poet, experiencing the dawn of a new day, feels he might be induced by its purity and brightness to create something artistic. This
conjecture proves right, for the idea of day-break releasing fresh possibilities brings to his mind the image of a bird trying to escape from a lake which is gradually freezing. Like the bird, the poet finds himself trying to escape from the emptiness of the white paper in order to create a poem. The poet's desire to create resembles the helpless wings of a bird flapping underneath the ice which is rapidly forming over them. The whiteness of the day, as it stretches endlessly across the landscape, is deceptive. The 'idea', as it first occurs in its vast promise, may be lost by its very vastness. Like the bird beating its wings without being able to rise, the idea palpitates without finding a form in which to assure its life.

The swan dwelt in its misery, even when it could have gone elsewhere, and got immobilized. Wallace Powlie is of opinion that this immobility was a willed action 'brought about with the consent of the poet, with the approval of the swan'. Here he sees an aesthetic conclusion: the poet trying to capture the elusive element which we know as beauty. But when beauty is caught it is no longer dynamic: it dies. Powlie comments upon this as follows:

Beauty is tragic because of its transitoriness, because of its unseizability. By its very principle, whether it be a woman, a bird or an idea, it has no power to remain unchanged, and when it is transposed into a poem or painting, it is likened to that which dies. The sonnet of Mallarmé is concerned precisely with the change from freedom of movement (va-t-il nous déchirer ce lac?) to an immobilization (où le plumage est pris), but which what is most important in this destiny of frustration is that it is willed by the swan in order to insure a maximum pathos of beauty.

The rigidity of death may settle down over the poet's creative effort, and what was to be a burst of creative life may end as a spectral pattern.

24 Ibid., pages 98-99.
The poet, like the swan, thinks of his future: what chance has he for poetic achievement, for self-realization? And in answer, he achieves 'a picture of the very moment in which the material world closes off his existence, crushes with the heaviness of a glacier, the will to live and move'. The swan, as also the poet, is trapped in his own love of perfection (= the pure waters of the lake), which then becomes the prison closing upon him (when it freezes). Winter has surprised the swan when he ought to have been migrating towards the warmth of life, and after a short struggle he is immobilized by the 'gleaming purity' which is his element. The poet, too, through words, abolishes reality, and gets trapped in the absolute of nothingness. In a letter to his friend, Henri Cazalis, Mallarmé speaks about an abyss he has come upon, and which he names 'le néant'. In his continued contemplation of the Absolute or its synonym, the Void, Mallarmé sometimes felt he would himself dissolve into nothingness. One day, after a harsh period of struggle and agony, he looked at himself in the mirror and knew that he had still great need of looking at himself, and if the mirror (ma glace de Venise) were not in front of the very table on which he was writing the letter to Cazalis, he would himself become the void; 'je re-deviendrais le Néant'.

Mallarmé saw the cosmos as void. In his imagination and in his poetry, everything became this void or became lost in this void. First, the night, its permanent symbol and its complete expression. Secondly, man. Thus, we see...

26 The three unhappy years spent at Tournon as a schoolmaster, which he described as 'les nuits de Tournon'.  
Mallarmé breaking with Baudelaire in refusing to accept the conditions of human life. So was it with Rimbaud. But while Mallarmé would make the journey from life to the absolute nothingness, Rimbaud would make the journey in order to reach a vision of 'everything'. Thus, Mallarmé and Rimbaud push in opposite directions to reach the extreme positions. How they have made use of language for their respective purposes has been shown in Elizabeth Sewell's excellent book, 'The Structure of Poetry'. Miss Sewell finds that Mallarmé's poetry tends towards the abstract and ordered structure of mathematics, while Rimbaud's poetry tends towards the disordered, concreteness of nightmare. Mallarmé, as she points out, tries to make the 'closed system' of language which is the poem, as self-contained as possible. He constantly strives to liberate the poem from all reference to the actual world. How does Mallarmé proceed to do this? Miss Sewell has her own answer. She suggests that we can think of language as having two aspects: 'sound-look' and 'reference'. The 'sound-look' is the series of sounds represented by words, which is picked up by the ear or imagined in silence in the head. 'Reference' is 'everything that happens in the mind when a word as sound-look is seen, heard, spoken or thought'. Mallarmé tries to create a structure only out of the 'sound-look' aspect of language, making it as free as possible from reference. In doing this, his poems get more and more obscure. In fact, the obscurity becomes greater in proportion to the success in making the structure free from 'reference'.

Rimbaud's method is to concentrate on the other aspect of language, trying to crowd in as many 'references' as possible into a poem. Thus, the two poets, each tending towards the opposite ideals of 'nothing' and 'everything: Elizabeth Sewell illustrates this by taking two examples: of Rimbaud's 'Bateau Ivre' and Mallarmé's 'Un Coup de Dés'. In the first, there is the journey of a crazy boat. In this poem the poet would 'see everything,
hear everything, experience everything'. There is the greatest profusion of imagery here, God's plenty, but with a revenge. There is also an enormous geography. The ship against the sky symbolizes the poet's relationship to his own universe. The poem ends with the words: 'I have seen all the works that are done under the sun'.

Mallarmé's ship tacks from 'the top of one page to the bottom of another'. The form of the poem permits 'the unification in the imagination of the words scattered about the page with the stars scattered about the night-sky'. The ship in each poem symbolizes the two universes of 'nightmare' and 'nothingness'. Let us first see what Rimbaud does in his poem. There is an attempt, indicated by the high concentration of the imagery, to include as many things as possible in the poem. The effect is nightmarish. Valéry also brings out this point when he says: 'In dreams everything is is automatically included, nothing left out'. Rimbaud hoped for 'un verbe poétique accessible un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens', a poetic language accessible, one day or the other, to all the senses. Such language would give the profusion of Rimbaud's universe. This all-inclusive universe is not far from what Baudelaire has described: a world in which

Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Rimbaud's poems endeavour — through language — to see the world in a grain of sand, and eternity in the hour.

Commenting on the poem 'Le Bateau Ivre', Enid Starkie says: 'All Rimbaud's efforts have gone to prevent the control and the comment of his own rational mind'. In 'Illuminations' Rimbaud says that the difficulty about his poetry is that

Ma sagesse est aussi dédaignée que le chaos.

Order, logic, is deliberately excluded; what then holds the poem together?
Deliberate disorder is not the basis of the poem; for, if that were so, there would be no work of art, no poem. There must be some principle of construction. We have noticed the likeness of the poem to nightmare. It has the unity of nightmare, and,

Nightmare knits up into an all powerful drama a certain diversity of independent sensations that works upon us in sleep.28 Rimbaud achieves this construction by removing rational sequence and making 'everything connect up with everything'. Every image evokes a host of associations, and that evokes a vision of the world. Rimbaud himself said:

Le poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens.29 ... Je finis par trouver sacré le désordre de mon esprit.30

But by mere 'dérèglement de tous les sens' the poet cannot construct the order or pattern of nightmare. The dream has to be put into the poem, and the dream-like state has to be created in the mind of the reader. 'Le rêve', the dream, as Baudelaire had remarked, is an active state. The poet has to train himself to study his dreams, and he has to work hard to recreate that dream in language. 'Indeed, anyone wishing to write down his dream owes it to himself to be infinitely awake'.31 Simultaneity, the sense of the presence of all things at once, gives the poem its peculiar power. The images are concentrated in the closest possible succession, so that the mind gives up the attempt to keep the images separate. (It is a case of 'if all the trees were one tree'). The crowding of imagery makes us feel there is nothing incongruous or irrelevant. Like Rimbaud's crazy boat, sensation-drunk, we are free from space and time, 'You know not where you are going; nor why, you enter everywhere, and answer everything'. All the world is before you,

28 Paul Valéry : 'Variété',II.
29 Arthur Rimbaud : 'Lettre du Voyant'.
31 Paul Valéry : 'Variété',I.
and all eternity. Such a method breaks up the logical mode of thought in us: we accept everything as in a dream.

Rimbaud begins the cult of irrationality. The revolt against Reason has taken many forms since Blake said, 'I assert for myself that I do not behold the outward creation, and that for me it is a hindrance'. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Ancient Mariner' are part of this revolt. Rimbaud, like the other Symbolists, sought the Unknown, "l'inconnu"; but his visionary powers and his dissatisfaction with the world made him distrust Reason. Reason which had directed the affairs of the world so long, had only left it an unsatisfactory place. Rimbaud revolts against Reason, and wishes to remake the world nearer what it was in his visions. With this aim, he began a systematic 'derèglement de tous les sens', and deliberately cultivated the habit of having hallucinations. This derangement of the senses may serve the poet in two ways. Drugs like hashish and debauchery may give the poet an experience of evil as of good;— the sort of experience that Baudelaire had— and that may lead him to the truth. Secondly, 'sensation was a sort of short-cut to Reality'. Rimbaud has an adolescent impatience in waiting for experience. He would have everything— evil, good, experience, knowledge—all at once; no matter what the cost. However, he controlled the hallucinations, and was not controlled by them, as were the Surrealists; nor did he fail to link up his hallucinations with material realities.

Rimbaud, through hallucination, would have a vision of the Unknown. But Reality, for him, was not (as it was with Nerval) something purely mystic or supernatural. It was closely connected with the physical; there is again something like the Baudelairean 'correspondances' of sensations; tastes
will fly, 'un gout de cendre vole dans l'air', colors will sing, 'il sonne une cloche de feu rose dans les nuages', flowers will speak,'Sur les versants, des moissons de fleurs grandes comme nos armes et nos coupes mugissent', or, 'Des fleurs magiques bourdonnait'.

This contact with the realities of everyday life on earth is not lost, even when he speaks of his 'enfer'. Rimbaud does not refer to the 'hell' of Christian penitence, a hell in which everything is known, and modelled on earthly lines, 'c'est encore la vie'. Plunging into hell while still alive: a gradual divestation of earthly limitations, but through a purposive will, time would cease, sound pass, touch vanish. Thus freed the poetic will could be in a position to explore the Unknown. But the poet realizes he would never get at the ultimate reality. He thinks of the symbolic boat and of the flowers which lie beyond that he will never touch though he may dream of them: 'O bras trop courts!'

With Mallarmé it was different. The ideal symbol is one which allow us to contemplate 'l'absence': 'to look into the heart of light, the silence'. Mallarmé aspired in poetry for the absolute: life was to be annihilated (abolished) in order to reach 'l'absence', or 'le néant'. And art is the means to abolish the real and to transform it into the Ideal:

Il n'est pas rien de si beau que ce qui n'existe pas.

Mallarmé, therefore, tried to abolish words by means of words. In 'Divagations', Mallarmé spoke of 'le merveille de transposer un fait de nature en se presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole', the marvel of transposing a fact of nature into its near disappearance in vibration according to the play of words. This brings to our mind not only Dylan Thomas's words: 'Out of the inevitable conflict of images ...
I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem', and Valéry's words in 'Melanges': 'Literature attempts by "words" to create the condition of an absence of words. Here is a poet who creates poetry by contemplating what Aurobindo has described as 'the unfathomable zero', -- 'le rien qui est la vérité the nothingness which is the truth.

Mallarme's universe of nothingness is made subject to the mind by the identification of the elements, (through the principles of dream), with something drawn from experience so that the poet 'hid his head amid a cloud of stars'. He creates a poem which is balanced between dream and logic. In 'Un Coup de Des' the familiar succession of words, syntax, is dislocated. The mind is left with a world which has fallen apart into a collection of individual references or images between which no connecting principles or similarities or succession can be established. Such a world means nothing. Rimbaud worked his purpose by using language to make the mind lose its sense of separateness and run everything into one — a total unification. Here, the opposite happens: nothing holds together. Mallarme abolished the world of experience and attained to that perfect freedom of the mind where it would create its own universe, abstract and perfect. But this universe was in the mind:

Toute a aboutir à un livre.

If the universe is in the mind and it is a universe of nothingness, then nothing can exist, not even the mind. This truth Mallarme realized, to his own cost:

I admit, ... but to yourself again that the humiliation of my triumph has been so great that I still find it necessary to look at myself in this mirror if I am able to think, and that if it were not there, in front of the table where I am writing this letter to you, I should revert to Nothingness. This is to let you know that I am impersonal now, no longer the Stephane Mallarme you knew ... but an attitude which the Universe of the Spirit possesses for seeing and developing itself, through that which was once myself. 38

The revolution which had started with Nerval was a drive to transcend the rational, and to reach by the exploitation of the resources of language, the suggestive powers of poetry, and a new organization of images analogous to that in dreams or music, the rich meaning which lay beyond. Symbolism included all these aspects, and its aim was no less than to reach and seize the absolute truth. In this way, it was held, Symbolism would attain a high status and value for itself. The work of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud marks the peaks of achievement in this endeavour; but their triumphs also indicated the dangers involved in the endeavour. It proved that the absolute was unattainable, and that poetry which sets as its aim the symbolization of absolute meaning gets cut off from its connection with life, and tends to be so obscure as to have no value for the reader. This lesson was a lesson to their successors. We find some poets who, instead of aiming at the absolute, concentrated on the attempt to apply symbolist ideals to actual life. Verlaine, Corbière and Laforgue all did this; they favoured symbolism and accepted its ideals but twisted them and transposed them into something else.

Corbière and Laforgue, two symbolists who have had the greatest influence on much of modern English poetry, keep to the ideal of aiming at a reality beyond appearances, but they suggest it through irony and through direct reference to actual life. Both these poets died young but there is a certain maturity and mastery in their work which is astonishing. They bring irony, legend, common life and colloquial language into poetry, and invent new techniques which would help the poet to react to complex realities in a complex way. The implicit acceptance of Reality as something spiritual or mystical is replaced by a new attitude in which the demands of intellect are not denied.

39 Enid Starkie: 'From Gautier to Eliot', p.146.
A free intellect rules the poetry of Laforgue: Pound characterized it as 'logopoeia' or 'the dance of the intellect among words'. This freedom of the intellect encourages an ironical contemplation of life. Laforgue's irony was his way of escaping from the subjectivity which all the Symbolists were bent on avoiding; it is his way of achieving the impersonality which would take him nearer Reality. Or, as one of his critics has observed:

Laforgue's ironical attitude is, at best, the irony with which Fichte believed that a true poet was bound to regard his own work, because to the extent that a work of art is complete, its author must be detached from it.

It is perhaps this ironical strain in Laforgue that suggests the distinction that Edmund Wilson makes between two groups of Symbolists, the 'serio-aesthetic' and the 'conversational-ironical' or 'ironic-contemplative'. It is from the latter group that Eliot drew his inspiration. The ironic attitude is also one form that the Symbolist revolt against society, civilization and convention assumes. Writers like Huysmans and Rimbaud represent an extreme position in this revolt. Rimbaud, 'fils de soleil' would change the world, using violence if necessary; and when he learned that this was not quite possible, he fell upon life as upon a foe, and grappled it with his bare arms. Huysmans took the aesthete's retreat to the Ivory Tower: he reflects his attitude in Des Esseintes, the hero of the novel 'À Rebours', who recoils from life in horror. Leaving to his servants the business of living he retreats to a high, artistic solitude, and thus refuses to be contaminated by the 'betise' or stupidity he finds in the life around him. Corbière and Laforgue neither fight with life, nor seek escape from it; they try to understand it in their own way, and express their reactions to it. With them Symbolism reaches a certain poise, a stage of fruition, after half a century of experimentation.