

# Beginnings

The Symbolist movement was born on September 18, 1886, when Jean Moréas, a Greek poet living in Paris, published his manifesto on Symbolism in the literary supplement to *Le Figaro*.<sup>1</sup> By publishing his manifesto in Paris's oldest newspaper—which had the highest circulation of any daily in the city—Moréas established his theory of Symbolism as authoritative. Moréas's article provoked an avalanche of writings about Symbolism in French newspapers and journals.<sup>2</sup> Artists, critics, and writers presented views that differed considerably but offered somewhat consistent formulations of the character, objectives, and processes of Symbolist works. All opposed Naturalism and advocated that works of art suggest ideas rather than describe appearances. They defined artists as gifted individuals, geniuses, who possessed a special capacity to discern and convey invisible realities. These realities were often accessed through the unconscious, particularly dreams.

## A MOVEMENT IS BORN

Moréas delineated a growing literary theme discussed by leading Parisian poets and critics, who proclaimed the superiority of this new, antiestablishment movement. Moréas's manifesto responded to an article published by a rival critic, Polish-born Téo-dor de Wyzéwa, about the contemporary poet Stéphane Mallarmé. In that article, published in Paris's first Symbolist journal, *La Vogue*, Wyzéwa declared: "Everything is a symbol, every molecule contains the handwriting of the universe . . . and art, the expression of all symbols, ought to be an idealized drama, summarizing and annulling the naturalistic representations whose deepest meanings are found in the soul of the poet."<sup>3</sup> Here Wyzéwa drew on the authority of science to validate his ideas; his reference to molecules suggests a familiarity with biochemistry. Significant strides in bacteriology had heightened awareness that cells are the building blocks of all living matter and the

corollary that all entities in the universe are physically interconnected. Investigations in comparative anatomy, psychology, and physiology led to the related belief in a collective human unconscious, whose depths only geniuses could comprehend.

Wyzéwa's formulation of Symbolism as a school of thought might have struck Moréas as vague, but his own was also ambiguous. Moréas—referring to the poet's special intuition—announced that the goal of Symbolism was “to clothe the Idea in a form perceptible to the senses.” The “Idea” could be any thought that the artist wanted to express, and Moréas suggested two ways to accomplish this. The more conservative approach involved representing “concrete phenomena” such as nature and human action as embodiments of “primordial ideas.”<sup>4</sup> The second, more subversive approach was to use “an archetypal and complex style: pure sounds, densely convoluted sentences” to effect Symbolism's synthesis.<sup>5</sup> “Archetypal” and “complex,” “pure” and “convoluted”—such terms suggest baffling paradoxes. And indeed, straightforward communication mattered little to some artists. Moréas's statement is particularly significant in the context of visual art because he proposed that ideas could best be conveyed through abstract signifiers, a notion supporting the technical/compositional definition of Symbolism.

Moréas concluded his manifesto on a wistful note: “Symbolism requires . . . the good, luxuriant, and lively French from the days . . . of François Rabelais, of Villon, of Rutebeuf, and of so many other writers who were free and took aim with the sharpest words, like the archers of ancient Thrace.”<sup>6</sup> For Moréas, who considered Symbolism in militant opposition to the status quo, these free-spirited and outspoken fifteenth- and sixteenth-century French literary mavericks were models of daring and originality who could inspire the Symbolists. On the one hand, Moréas called for a new kind of literary product; on the other, he directed writers to mine the national past for the raw materials from which to construct it.

While drawing inspiration from the national past might seem incompatible with the production of modern works, such a paradoxical strategy was characteristic of the way in which artists and intellectuals expressed dissatisfaction with life in the final decades of the nineteenth century. There was much to grumble about in the 1880s, particularly in Paris. Those needing continuity and stability to ensure their well-being would not have found it there. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Paris underwent a demographic and physical transformation unlike that of any other European capital. To begin with, the city's population nearly tripled (from 1 million to 2.7 million), an increase due to the relocation of peasants from all over France. Forced to abandon rural areas as a result of land reform, mechanization, and growing family size, they arrived at a rate of almost thirty thousand per year; they brought with them unfamiliar customs and incomprehensible dialects. By 1880, fewer than half of Parisians had been born in Paris (Moréas and Wyzéwa were both foreigners), and most of the buildings within the city limits had been constructed during the preceding thirty years.<sup>7</sup> Paris's medieval center had been razed in the 1850s and its inhabitants evicted. The city's maze of narrow, crooked streets, lined with buildings both majestic and modest—which documented centuries of architectural history—was demolished during the modernization campaign of Emperor Napoleon III (r. 1852–70).<sup>8</sup>



1 *Civilization*, from *Jugend* 1, no. 25 (1896): 407. Photo: Per Nordahl.

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's investigations of contemporary social change clarify the context in which Symbolism evolved.<sup>9</sup> Tönnies studied the problematic transition from traditional village life, with its security and networks of kinship, to a modern industrial society that reduced an individual's worth to the cash value of his labor. In *Community and Civil Society*, published in 1887, Tönnies observed that the shift from traditional to modern society required that cultural practice, consensus, and personal relationships based on trust yield to legal policy, coercion, and official relationships based on fear. He concluded that the consequences for individuals were catastrophic, a judgment with which many of his contemporaries concurred. Reduced to cogs in the wheel of industrial capitalism, people were forced to sacrifice self-esteem, health, happiness, pride in labor, and even their personal morality to benefit mostly the affluent members of society. *Community and Civil Society* seemed to confirm the increasingly widespread cynicism about industrialization. It was the bourgeoisie's cynical disregard for the working and peasant classes that E. von Baumgarten depicted in an illustration, sarcastically titled *Civilization*, for the German journal *Jugend* (Fig. 1). Here an elegantly dressed couple walks daintily across a field littered with skeletons that seem to pose more of an inconvenience than a stimulus to remorse.

Moréas expressed dissatisfaction with contemporary conditions and admired independent thought and freedom, a common response among progressive intellectuals to escalating political polarization in France.<sup>10</sup> France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) exacerbated

internal tensions, particularly when Emperor Napoleon III abdicated and was replaced by the politician Adolphe Thiers, who became the first president of France's Third Republic. Thiers had opposed the disastrous decision to declare war and made many concessions to the Germans as part of the peace settlement. Parisians were enraged by Thiers's capitulation. In defiance, sympathetic national guardsmen assumed control of the city, which was run for a brief period by a coalition of democratically elected committees (the Commune). These committees fought German occupation, restored essential services, and provided relief for those suffering under the four-month siege. The Commune operated according to the principles established by the French Revolution of 1789: freedom, equality, and solidarity. When Thiers retook the city with the aid of army troops in late May 1871, more than twenty thousand citizens were executed as traitors during "Bloody Week," and Thiers established the democratic Third Republic, which lasted until 1940.

Since France experienced a change of regime on average every fifteen years in the nineteenth century, the founding of the Third Republic did not immediately inspire confidence. Indeed, the final three decades of the nineteenth century were tumultuous, with two periods of particularly acrimonious political volatility: 1885–89 under Georges Boulanger and 1894–99 during the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>11</sup> Anarchists, Bonapartists, republicans, royalists, and socialists all struggled for control of the government. At the time Moréas was writing, at the beginning of 1886, President Jules Grévy had recently appointed the reactionary General Boulanger minister of war. Boulanger's desire for retribution (against Germany), revision (of the constitution), and restoration (of the Bourbon monarchy) attracted the support of both Bonapartists and royalists and threatened the liberal, egalitarian foundation of the fledgling Third Republic. In 1889 Boulanger contemplated a coup d'état that, had he succeeded, would have fulfilled the pessimistic expectations of those who considered France incapable of maintaining a stable government. In this context, the nostalgia, social alienation, and yearning for autonomy and novelty that Moréas expressed in his manifesto seem understandable, if not predictable.

## EVOCATION, NOT NARRATION

Two weeks after Moréas published his manifesto, René Ghil, another critic in the crowded circle of Parisian Symbolist intellectuals, addressed the readers of the Symbolist journal *La Décadence*— numbering in the hundreds in contrast to *Le Figaro*'s tens of thousands. In his piece, Ghil for the first time linked art to Symbolism, although he did not suggest that art might be used to achieve Symbolist objectives: "To symbolize is to evoke, not to say and narrate and paint."<sup>12</sup> Ghil clearly had a limited vision of art's capacities: for him, painting involved detailed and realistic description; he evidently could not envision its evocative potential. Still, Ghil's declaration of Symbolism's boundaries clarified the ideas Moréas had presented. To Ghil, evocation, insinuation, and suggestion were acceptable modes of expression, but description, logical

action, and realism were not. Symbolist artists endorsed these restrictions but interpreted them in different ways. Like their writer colleagues, Symbolist artists sought to clothe ideas in perceptible forms, while believing that art should direct viewers toward immaterial entities and metaphysical truths. The particular artist's goals, instincts, and imagination determined the specific forms that these creations assumed. In 1889 the critic Georges Vanor described an ambitious mission for Symbolists in his book *L'Art symboliste*: "The task of the symbolist poet will be to discover the idea through its figural representation; to understand the relation of things visible, perceptible, and tangible in the world to the intelligible essence in which they participate . . . to clothe the idea in a figural signification and to express truths by images and analogies."<sup>13</sup>

The Austrian painter Gustave Klimt (1862–1918) echoed the ideas of Vanor in his pictorial manifesto, *Nuda Veritas* (*Naked Truth*), that declared the presentation of unadorned truth as the artist's mission (Plate 1).<sup>14</sup> Truth stands between gilded inscriptions bearing the painting's title and an aphorism by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Schiller that encourages artists to remain faithful to their individual vision: "You can't please everyone through your effort and artwork—that makes it less right. To please many is bad."<sup>15</sup> The woman is an allegorical figure whose nudity symbolizes unadorned truth. Indeed, this beautiful figure hides nothing: her flowing tresses signify both naturalness and intimacy, whereas the genteel women of Klimt's time always wore their hair up in public. In depicting her pubic hair, a violation of the rules of decorum promulgated by art academies, Klimt was insisting on honesty. He transformed Truth into a modern symbol through what Reinhold Heller describes as "the pronounced artificiality of the image and its pronounced reference to its own flat surface."<sup>16</sup> The inscriptions, stylized scrolls, random daisies, swirling blue vapor, and slithering serpent reinforce the unreality of the scene, as does Klimt's use of gold leaf, a nontraditional material that Symbolist artists favored because it explicitly signaled artificiality (as it suggested richness and spirituality for medieval artists). Viewed through a misty vapor, Truth, motionless and entranced, holds a magnifying glass to enhance perception, which here is intuitive rather than visual. While nakedness is often associated with moral purity, the presence of the serpent recalls Eve and original sin. Did Klimt intend to suggest that the procreative impulse represented the naked truth? Was he proposing the shocking idea that erotic urges were honest and decent? Did he intend to subvert the customary interpretation of naked truth?<sup>17</sup>

Conventional mores were certainly on the artist's mind. The year before he painted *Nuda Veritas*, Klimt fell under the critique of the Austrian censors, who forced him to conceal the genitalia of the mythic hero Theseus in a poster that he had designed for a Vienna Secessionist exhibition. That *Nuda Veritas* condoned the free exercise of erotic impulses seems plausible in light of Klimt's biography. Klimt, who never married but had a series of concurrent relationships rumored to have produced more than a dozen children, had a lifelong fascination with the erotic. Thus, despite its text and legible details, *Nuda Veritas*'s ambiguity permits multiple interpretations. Uncertainty was a part of the modern condition that found expression in Symbolist artworks.

## MUSIC

Moréas's suggestion of using "pure sounds" as a strategy for conveying ideas evokes music, one of the most important influences on Symbolist artists.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose writings helped shape Symbolist theory, proclaimed music "the most powerful of all arts."<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer, a skilled flutist, believed that music's direct appeal to the emotions and the imagination made it superior to all other arts. This notion emerged earlier in the writing and artistic practice of Romantics such as Eugène Delacroix<sup>20</sup> and Philipp Otto Runge and continued as an undercurrent throughout the nineteenth century. A belief in the superiority of music resurfaced as a key aspect of Symbolism and was reflected in titles ("Death Listens," "The Voice of Evil"), in subject matter, and in compositions that aspired to the fluidity and suggestiveness of music. An interest in music can be attributed partly to artistic goals and partly to changes in the sonic environment. For artists who rejected mimesis, music provided inspiration for the reformulation of their artistic approach. Music's appeal was also understandable in an era when noise from the industrial and urban environment supplanted both silence and the sounds of nature.

## NATURALISM AND A WORLD OF FLUX

Symbolism in the visual arts was first described in April 1887, one year after the publication of Moréas's manifesto. In an article titled "A Symbolist Painter" published in the Brussels journal *L'Art moderne*, the art critic Emile Verhaeren defined Symbolism in opposition to Naturalism, which had "led to the fragmentation of the object through merciless description, painstaking microscopic analysis."<sup>21</sup> Verhaeren's condemnation of Naturalism reflected transformations in art and society since the 1830s, when Naturalism had initially rebelled against academic art. After fifty years, in his opinion, Naturalism was no longer modern.

Certainly, Naturalism originated as a culturally and politically progressive alternative to the then-dominant academic art, which favored formulaic depictions of episodes from history, myth, or literature, as well as a narrow range of nature subjects, composed in accordance with longstanding guidelines. Because of its beginnings in eighteenth-century academies sponsored by absolutist monarchs, academic art was perceived as implicitly antidemocratic, anti-individualistic, and antagonistic to originality and inventiveness. In contrast, Naturalist artists acted independently, seeking to represent the visible world objectively and accurately without any other restrictions on subject matter or technique.

With its focus on outward appearances, Naturalism was ideally suited to record the rapidly evolving everyday world of the second half of the nineteenth century. The pace of this evolution was epitomized by changes in transportation.<sup>22</sup> In 1873, when Jules Verne published his bestseller *Around the World in Eighty Days*, such a feat was still a fantasy, but by 1889 the American journalist Nelly Bly could circle the earth in seventy-two days; three years later an American busi-





2 Auguste Renoir, *Dance at the Moulin de la Galette*, 1876, oil on canvas, 131 × 175 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (RF 2739). Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

nessman, George Train, did it in sixty. Spreading railway networks linked major cities to industrial areas and ports and later to each other. Once national networks had been created, international connections followed: the Orient Express, a luxury train linking London with Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), began service in 1883. The development of steel-plated steamships, particularly the replacement of the paddle wheel with the propeller in the 1880s, streamlined the transportation of goods and people across oceans.

The improvements in transportation during this period profoundly changed the character of cities. Streetcars began to appear in the 1830s, at first powered by horses and later by steam and electricity; they facilitated the rapid growth of cities by enabling people to live farther from their place of work. The bicycle and later the automobile let individuals (initially only the affluent) move rapidly on their own terms. The invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876 further accelerated the exchange of information. In 1880 a concert was broadcast by telephone (from Zurich to Basel), and in the same year the *London Times* installed a telephone in the House of Commons for quicker reporting of political events. By 1885, thirty-three German cities were linked by telephone to Berlin (but not to each other), and by 1887, private telephone subscriptions were becoming common: there were 150,000 in the United States (one phone per 400 inhabitants), 26,000 in Great Britain (one per 1,200), and 22,000 in Germany (one per 2,200). This exponential expansion of communications made the world seem a much smaller place within one generation.<sup>23</sup>

Vanguard artists, especially the Impressionists, documented this exhilarating world. Paintings such as *Moulin de la Galette* (1876; Fig. 2) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) depicted



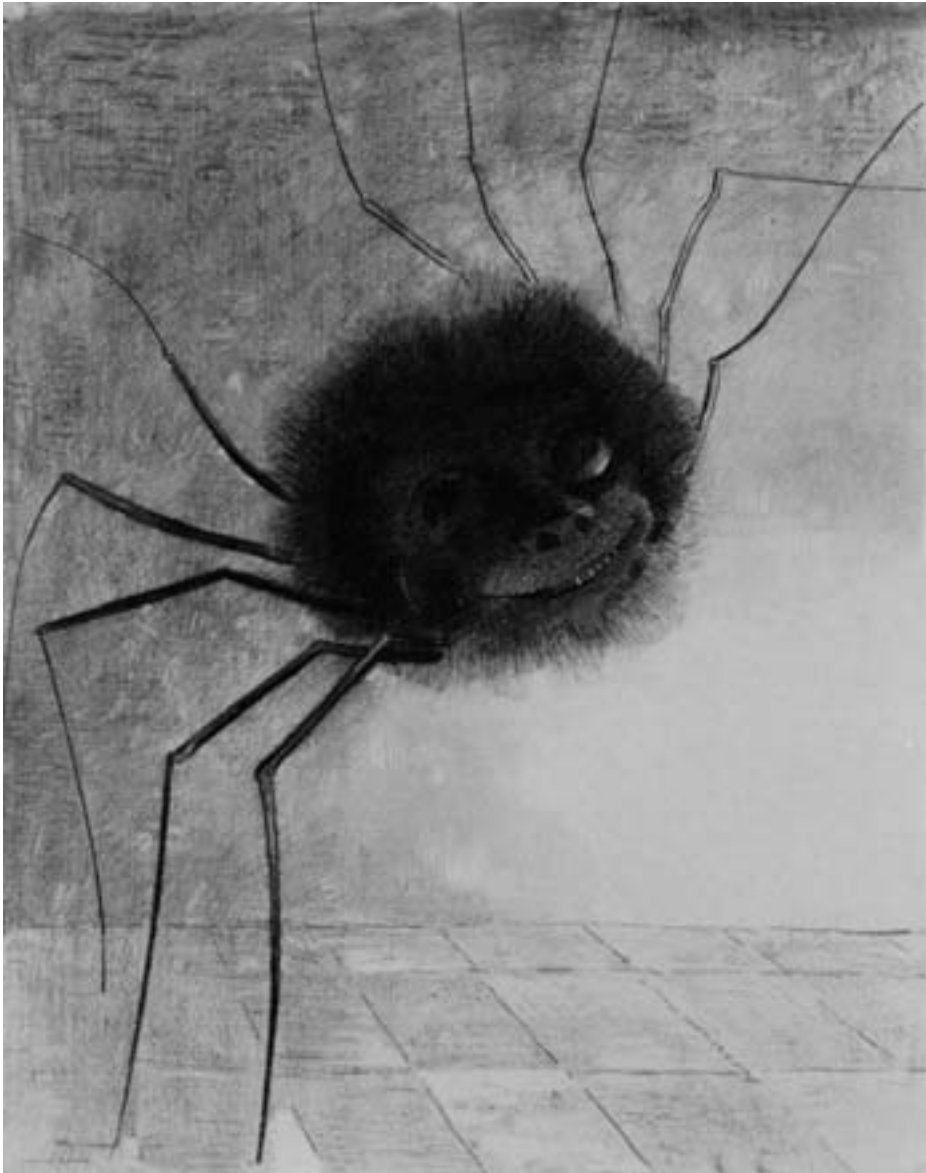
popular locales where social classes mixed with a freedom unimaginable a generation earlier. Hovering above the dancers are newly installed gaslights, which allowed this popular outdoor Parisian café to extend its hours and let summer socializing continue late into the evening. Renoir captured the perceptible light and atmosphere, visible as they affect surrounding objects. The documentation of light and atmosphere was a primary concern of Impressionist artists, who pursued the naturalist impulse to represent the visible world accurately by examining the subtle factors that influenced it.<sup>24</sup> Many Impressionists studied scientific developments in color theory and optics to better understand the forces shaping their perception of the visible world.<sup>25</sup>

### THE SECRET SPACE OF DREAMS

In the opening line of his manifesto, Moréas declared Symbolism “an enemy . . . of declamation . . . of objective description,”<sup>26</sup> an assessment that Verhaeren subsequently endorsed. “Symbolism will do the opposite [of Naturalism]. . . . In Symbolism fact and world become mere pretexts for ideas; they are handled as appearances, ceaselessly variable, and ultimately manifest themselves only as the dreams of our brains.”<sup>27</sup> Moréas and Verhaeren renounced Naturalism’s preoccupation with detachment and the realm of the senses; they placed empiricism at the service of imagination. Verhaeren’s wording was especially appropriate given the central importance of dreams to the Symbolists.

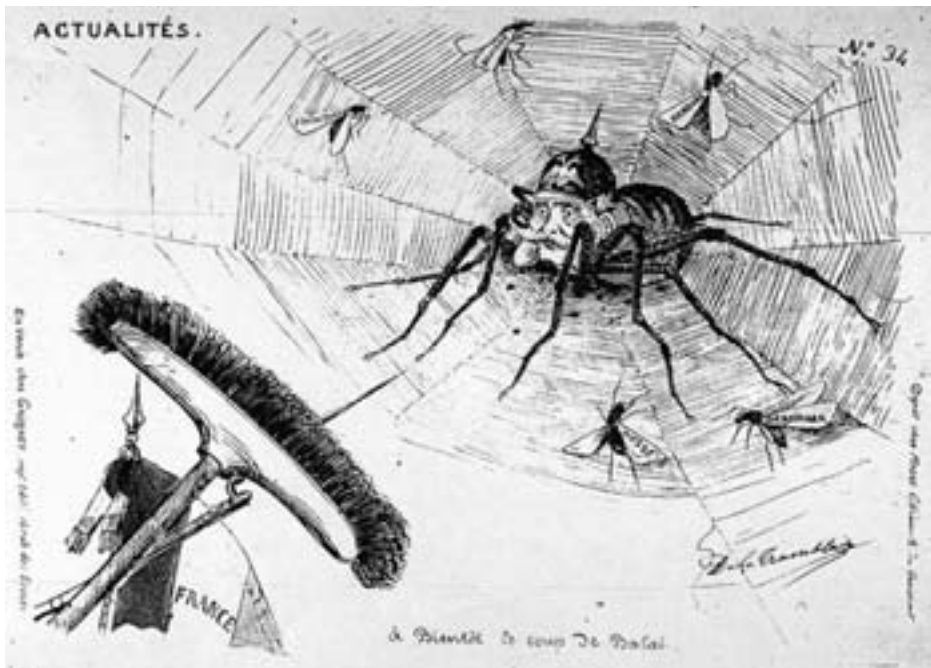
The French artist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) alluded to the inspirational character of dreams in his letters and diaries, acknowledging their power to resolve paradoxes that the intellect could not penetrate: “my dream, with the boldness of the unconscious, solves many questions that my understanding does not approach.”<sup>28</sup> In a letter to Gauguin’s protégé Emile Bernard (1868–1941), the writer Joris-Karl Huysmans endorsed the primacy of dreams: “You are, I think, absolutely right regarding your concept of art. The dream should be the construction, the act of faith of a soul, and the manifestation of a single soul representing all others, changing while remaining itself and affirming itself by liturgies that are at once different and the same; architecture, sculpture, painting, the glass conceived by itself.”<sup>29</sup>

Three decades earlier in his “Poem of Hashish,” the poet Charles Baudelaire recognized two distinct types of dreams: those related to the everyday life of the dreamer and those that are “absurd and unforeseen,” which Baudelaire referred to as “hieroglyphic” and in which he discerned “the supernatural side of life.”<sup>30</sup> It was the supernatural that fascinated the Symbolists, who saw in dreams a gateway to universal truths. Artists as well as writers explored this gateway, and it became a central motif in the work of Odilon Redon (1840–1916), whose first lithographic series, *In the Dream*, appeared in 1882.<sup>31</sup> *The Smiling Spider* (Fig. 3), a charcoal drawing produced while Redon was working on *In the Dream*, is a hybrid creature that could emerge only in the secret space of dreams.<sup>32</sup> The spider’s friendly eyes and toothy grin look weird but not threatening; it appears amiable, not evil and dangerous, as it balances on three legs as



3 Odilon Redon, *The Smiling Spider*, 1881, charcoal on paper, 49.5 × 39 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 29932). Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York (Michèle Bellot).

if dancing: Redon signals the fantastic nature of his spider by giving it ten, rather than eight, legs. The position of the viewer—at eye-level with the creature—indicates its colossal size. Redon's affable spider subverted the normative view, recorded by Hippolyte Taine in *On Intelligence* (1870). There, Taine described a man arriving home to find “*objects transformed into specters*, representing sometimes huge spiders which ran at him to drink his blood.”<sup>33</sup> A satirical



4 *Wilhelm I as a Spider*, from *Actualités*, no. 34, n.d. Photo: Per Nordahl.

print from 1870 using similar imagery represented France's optimism at the onset of the Franco-Prussian War (Fig. 4). Here, Wilhelm, the emperor of Prussia and the first emperor of a unified Germany, is depicted as a spider standing his ground on his web amid ensnared flies representing Denmark and the German provinces of Bavaria, Hanover, and Hesse. Republican France is a broom about to sweep away the anxious Wilhelm-spider, who in reality swiftly vanquished French forces and besieged Paris.

Scientists were eager to understand dreams and dreaming. While Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) was the most influential investigation, it was by no means the first. In 1861 the Breslau philosophy professor Karl Albert Scherner sought to document and analyze dreams in *The Life of the Dream* (1861).<sup>34</sup> There he explained that dreams clothe themselves in a symbolic language (often sexual) that could be decoded. While the boundaries between conscious and unconscious, normal and deviant were clearly defined among "civilized" peoples, the German psychologist Paul Radestock posited that the situation was different in "un-civilized" regions—from Queensland to Greenland. In *Sleep and Dream* (1879), Radestock observed that many indigenous peoples believed that the dead were constantly present although they appeared to the living only in dreams.<sup>35</sup> Radestock's notion of cultural differences in what people dreamed about relied on the racist theories of Arthur de Gobineau's four-volume *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853 and 1855).<sup>36</sup> Radestock discerned special powers among "primitive"



5 Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892, oil on burlap mounted on canvas, 72.4 × 92.4 cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. A. Conger Goodyear Collection, 1965.

peoples, such as a mystical bond to the unseen realm.<sup>37</sup> Dreams, according to this interpretation, could be sources of comfort to the living; mediums provided a vehicle for communication between this world and the world beyond.<sup>38</sup>

Gauguin's *Manao tupapaupau*, or *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (Fig. 5),<sup>39</sup> painted during his two-year stay in Tahiti (June 1891–September 1893), implied the inferiority of darker races as well as their privileged rapport with the beyond. Clues to its meaning are found in Gauguin's letters and journals, in which he explicated his works, but these sources, combined with information about his life, also provide evidence for alternate explanations. Gauguin's motivations for highlighting a particular reading of his works are themselves often suspect. In his autobiographical novel *Noa Noa* (1891), Gauguin wrote: "When I opened the door . . . I saw Tehura . . . immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed with her eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me, and seemed not to recognize me. . . . Might she not with frightened face take me for one of the demons and specters, one of the Tupapaüs, with which the legends of her race people sleepless nights?"<sup>40</sup> While Gauguin's remarks suggest that *Spirit of the Dead Watching* is explicitly autobiographical, an examination of the painting yields another interpretation. Noting the oddly androgynous physique of Gauguin's thirteen-year-old mistress, whose gender is concealed by her position on the bed, Stephen Eisenman speculates that Gauguin launched "an assault upon the tradition of the European female nude," as Édouard Manet had done before him.<sup>41</sup>



6 Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863–65, oil on canvas, 130.5 × 190 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (RF 644).  
Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

Eisenman's interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Gauguin considered Manet a role model and brought a reproduction of Manet's controversial *Olympia* (exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1865) with him to Tahiti.

*Olympia* (Fig. 6) outraged audiences because it violated contemporary norms. While female nudes were traditional artistic subjects, the confrontational gaze of Manet's model was unusually aggressive. The subject's very name was a common pseudonym for high-class prostitutes, an unsuitable subject for Europe's most prestigious art exhibition. Manet's uneven finish—Olympia appears flat and unmodeled, while the flowers are highly detailed—violated the standards of both academic art and Naturalism. In *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, Gauguin transformed Manet's insolent figure into a Tahitian girl whose dark complexion contrasts with Olympia's pallor. This inversion emerges in other ways as well: Tehura lies on her stomach and faces the opposite direction. Instead of an elegant Parisian boudoir, Tehura inhabits a rustic, incoherent space of brightly patterned fabric. The abstract landscape on the wall behind Tehura contains faces, feathers, leaves, and birds, and a column partially conceals a masked and cowed figure: the spirit of the dead. Real and imaginary beings coexist on the canvas. Gauguin's emphasis on surface—paint soaked into the coarse canvas, conspicuous brushwork, thick outlines, title inscribed in the upper left—further inhibits a reading of *Spirit of the Dead Watching* as realistic.





7 Max Klinger, *Anxieties*, Plate 7 from *A Glove*, 1881 (published 1893), etching on chine collé.  
Indiana University Art Museum. Photo by Michael Cavanaugh and Kevin Montague.

While the fluidity between wakefulness and dreaming had long been accepted by non-Western cultures, by the late nineteenth century psychologists, as well as artists and poets, had begun to recognize its presence in Western cultures as well. Freud claimed, for example, that dreams function universally as mediators between consciousness and unconsciousness because they translate hidden desires and anxieties into symbolic form.<sup>42</sup> This is the subject of a series of etchings by Max Klinger (1857–1920), *A Glove*, in which a lady's glove retrieved from the ice by an admiring fellow skater (Klinger) at a rink in Berlin becomes a fetish object that initiates a strange journey into the artist-subject's unconscious. In *Anxieties* (Fig. 7), Klinger sleeps, his pillow leaning against the treasured glove, which has assumed gigantic proportions that no doubt correspond to its psychological significance. A bald swimmer keeps an assortment of weird creatures, some mammalian, some amphibian, at bay and tries to warn Klinger of the hands that reach out in apparent search of their glove. All of this takes place in a watery environment (symbolic of the unconscious) during a lunar eclipse. Klinger shows how in the secret space of dreams psychological states are transformed into symbolic forms that are incoherent by normative conscious standards.

Similarly, in *Night* (Fig. 8), the Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918) substantiates Freud's hypothesis by revealing how dreams expose hidden fears.<sup>43</sup> Hodler, like Klinger, captures the irrational yet intensely real space of dreams, furnished with components that seem logical but are not, that communicates meanings intelligible only when present within the magical boundaries of the unconscious. *Night*, like *Anxieties*, is autobiographical. Hodler portrayed himself awakening frightened in the night with a cowled figure—as in Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching*—hovering over his lower torso. Draped in black and of indeterminate gender, the specter occupies a central position both in the composition and in Hodler's consciousness:



8 Ferdinand Hodler, *Night*, 1890, oil on canvas, 116 × 299 cm. Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland.

Hodler gazes at it in terror. The specter's position on, over, or beside Hodler's genitalia charges the image with erotic tension. The specter appears bent over and busy, but the nature of this activity is obscure and therefore unsettling. We can only infer from Hodler's expression that it is far from pleasurable. Might it relate to castration anxiety, which Freud describes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*?

Freud posited that castration anxiety had two aspects: physical and metaphorical. This anxiety was aggravated in the late nineteenth century by parents threatening children's genitals with physical punishment (noted by Freud) and by fears prompted by sexual myths. For instance, doctors warned of sperm depletion resulting from frequent copulation, devices designed to prevent masturbation proliferated, and experts advised men over fifty to abstain from intercourse in order to postpone death.<sup>44</sup> Metaphorical castration expressed fear of authority and loss of power. The latter particularly affected men, whose absolute social control was steadily being eroded. If the cowed figure in Hodler's *Night* is female, another interpretation, one informed by the predominant Roman Catholicism of Hodler's Geneva audience, emerges. The cowed figure assumes the "horse-ride" coitus position that the Catholic Church (dominant in the western part of Switzerland, where Hodler resided) banned because of the belief that it impeded procreation. To discourage its use, the church warned of dire consequences for men: hernias, ulceration of the bladder and penis, or worse yet, effeminacy.<sup>45</sup> This interpretation is especially compelling. For Hodler's acquaintances, *Night*'s sexual tension was confirmed by the presence of his former mistress and his then-wife (whom he divorced in 1891) among the sleepers.<sup>46</sup> Hodler directed viewers toward a particular interpretation by inscribing on the back of the painting, "Some who go peacefully to bed in the evening will not wake up in the morning."

Vanguard artists often had conflicts with the art establishment, which controlled an artist's access to the public through exhibitions. Hodler, for instance, constantly battled the conservative taste of art officials and his Swiss public. Although the mayor of Geneva ordered *Night*



withdrawn from an 1891 exhibition, it appeared in Paris the same year at the Salon du Champs-de-Mars organized by France's Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. The French art critic Joséphin Péladan wrote: "the nightmare kneeling, black and vaguely formed upon a chest, is really frightening. . . . The picture is unforgettable."<sup>47</sup> Following uneventful showings abroad, Hodler did not expect *Night* to provoke controversy when he submitted it to the Swiss National Exposition held in Geneva in 1896. But it did: Swiss censors hung a black cloth in its place.<sup>48</sup>

## EXPRESSING THE INEXPRESSIBLE

Verhaeren's statement that "Fact and world become mere pretexts for ideas" was echoed more than a decade later by French artist-theorist Maurice Denis (1870–1943): "Symbolism was . . . neo-platonic. Writers and painters came to agree that natural objects are signs denoting ideas; that the visible is the manifestation of the invisible."<sup>49</sup> The urge to represent intangible entities reflected a current of antimaterialism in European intellectual circles and an urge to explore new subjects in art. The growth of a free-market economy forced individuals to fend for themselves under conditions in which an investment of time and labor did not guarantee survival. The resultant fixation with making money led to a psychological imbalance addressed by nineteenth-century reformers—including optimistic Symbolists. At the same time, by the 1880s, a younger generation of artists wanted to pursue a path more innovative than that of their Naturalist predecessors. Representing nonphysical entities appealed to young artists in part because the subjects were seldom explored in visual art and in part because such subjects relied on feeling and intuition, cherished qualities that had seemingly vanished from modern life.

Denis indicated that states of mind attracted artists' attention. Whereas Naturalist artists documented actions, Symbolists documented feelings and thoughts. The quest for visual equivalents to psychological states such as despair, hope, jealousy, and sorrow preoccupied Symbolist artists. *Breton Eve*, or *Melancholy* (Fig. 9) by Paul Sérusier (1864–1927) evokes sadness through both title and form. Before eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Eve lived a carefree existence in Paradise. Afterwards, her conscience awakened with her realization that she had made a decision with dire consequences. Sérusier represented the profound sadness that accompanies such knowledge in *Breton Eve*, while attributing primitive, biblical innocence to contemporary Breton peasants.

Sérusier's Eve sits naked in a rocky pasture in Brittany. Her posture is self-contained, her head bowed in thought. The figure's nudity, combined with the painting's title, evokes the punishment for Eve and Adam's disobedience, the consequence of which was a variety of impulses, including the urge to procreate. Does Sérusier's Eve regret succumbing to temptation, the assumption of responsibilities, her awareness of mortality? Because Symbolist art suggests rather than narrates, Sérusier's painting resists attempts to limit its meaning. At the same time, the painting's historical context and the artist's personal views restrict the range of plausible interpretations. Sérusier employed the traditional medium of oil on canvas for this picture, but he



9 Paul Sérusier, *Breton Eve, or Melancholy*, 1891, oil on canvas, 73 × 60 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris (RF 1981-5). Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York (J. Schormans).

strayed from a conventional rendering by simplifying forms (clouds, rocky outcroppings), distorting colors (blue rocks, orange bushes), and painting with clearly discernible brushstrokes. His technique emphasizes that the image is artifice, reinforcing the painting's function as the visual equivalent of a state of mind—melancholy—rather than a traditional “window” onto a view.

The 1896 woodcut *Melancholy*, or *Evening* (Plate 2) by Edvard Munch (1863–1944) depicts the same emotion in a different way.<sup>50</sup> Based on a painting of the same title executed in 1892,

the woodcut expresses Munch's conviction that meditation while in an unhappy state stimulates creativity.<sup>51</sup> Here, a man sits in a traditional reflective pose, his chin resting on his hand and his elbow on his knee. The woodcut's gloomy subject reflects a sequence of reverses in the artist's life during 1892: his friend August Strindberg had recently fled Munch's company, convinced that Munch sought to kill him; a potentially lucrative commission by the Société des Cent Bibliophiles to illustrate Charles Baudelaire's poetry collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) was abruptly withdrawn; and Munch was desperately poor.<sup>52</sup> The figure in *Melancholy* has an ambiguous relationship to its setting: silhouetted against, yet integrated into, the bleak coastal landscape. The trope of a melancholy man by the sea appeared in earlier works with which Munch was likely familiar: Max Klinger's *Night* (from the series of etchings *On Death*, Part I, 1889) and *Monk by the Sea* (1809–10, Nationalgalerie, Berlin) by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). In both of these works, the expanse of the sea and the lapping of the waves evoke the subject's profound and relentless thoughts. The unrealistic character of the landscape in Munch's *Melancholy* makes it uncertain whether it is imaginary or remembered, but an 1892 diary entry resolves the issue: "One evening I walked along the seashore. It sighed and sucked around the stones. Long grey clouds streaked the horizon. It looked as if everything was dead—as in another world. A landscape of death. Life began over there by the landing dock. There was a man and a woman—and there came another man. With oars over his shoulder. And the boat was tied up down there—ready to leave."<sup>53</sup> Munch conflates this moment with another situation: the figure resembles his friend Jappe Nilssen, who in 1892 was in the midst of a love triangle that ended in disappointment.<sup>54</sup>

Munch experimented with print media in the 1890s as part of his search for new means of expression. In 1896 he began making woodcuts, having already explored lithography and etching. While Munch liked the reproducibility of the medium, many of his prints (including this one) are singular works; after printing and hand-coloring these images, he continued to carve the wood block.<sup>55</sup> The coarse contours and exaggerations in form and color—particularly noticeable in the foreground swirls and arabesques alluding to rocks and waves—reinforce an awareness that this work resulted from artistic choices intended to convey a psychological state.

Consistent with Moréas's advice, both Sérusier and Munch incorporated traditional elements in their works. Sérusier presupposed that his Roman Catholic French audience would be familiar with the figure of Eve, while Munch alluded to conventional representations of melancholy. The most famous of these is Albrecht Dürer's 1514 engraving *Melancholia*, in which a sullen female figure sits with her elbow resting on her knee and her chin in her hand. Dürer's image belonged to a long tradition of interest in this psychological state, as evidenced by the publication of Robert Burton's three-volume study, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, in 1621. Burton classified melancholy as a pathological state, its symptoms of despair, fear, hallucinations, and erotic desire caused by an excess of black bile.<sup>56</sup> The title page of the 1621 edition consists of nine scenes framing the author's portrait and the title and publisher boxes (Fig. 10). Two feature men seated with their heads resting in their hands, a pose reminiscent of Dürer's *Melancholia*. The third volume of Burton's study, "Love Melancholy," is particularly relevant to Munch's *Melancholy*.



In addition to this familiar concept of melancholy, a competing interpretation of melancholy emerged in the fifteenth century, which held, as did Munch, that it inspired creativity. For the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), melancholy signified genius in men and insanity in women, a theory that accords with nineteenth-century attitudes about women as the inferior antipode of men.<sup>57</sup>

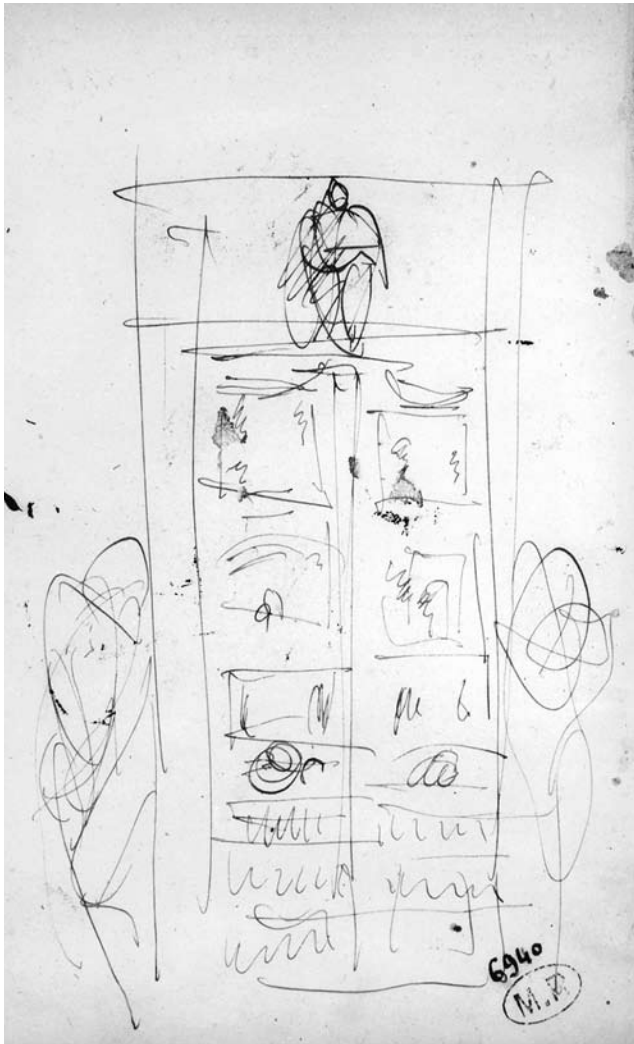
Denis's notion that phenomena "signify states of mind," emerged in Auguste Rodin's *Gates of Hell* (Fig. 11).<sup>58</sup> The *Gates* embody the conviction articulated by the critic Albert Aurier that artists possessing a "transcendental capacity for emotion" force "symbols—that is, ideas—[to] rise out of the darkness and become animated, start living a life that is no longer our contingent and relative life but a life of dazzling light that is the essential life, the life of art, the life of the being."<sup>59</sup> Begun in 1880 as the portal for a new museum of decorative arts in Paris, the commission was never finished because the museum project was abandoned. In the two decades during which Rodin (1840–1917) actively worked on the *Gates*, it functioned as a crucible for new works and aesthetic experiments. In typical Symbolist fashion, the subject of the *Gates*—Dante's *Inferno*—was not directly relevant to a museum of decorative arts but rather to more generalized ideas about creativity and human desire. The poem was part of *The Divine Comedy* trilogy composed between 1308 and 1321. The *Inferno*, the place of eternal suffering in the afterlife, was populated by those whose yearnings and anguish (psychological as well as physical) remained unresolved, such as the tragic historical figures Ugolino della Gherardesca and Paolo Maltesta and Francesca di Rimini. When her neglectful husband caught Francesca, impassioned by love poetry, on the verge of her first kiss with her brother-in-law, Paolo (the subject of Rodin's famous sculpture *The Kiss*, c. 1884, Rodin Museum, Philadelphia), he murdered them on the spot. Their spirits remained united but tormented by the physical consummation denied them. Count Ugolino della Gherardesca was unjustly accused of treason in the late thirteenth century by Archbishop Ruggieri, who sentenced Ugolino, along with his sons and grandsons, to imprisonment and starvation. As the boys weakened and died, the survivors begged Ugolino to devour them so that he could live longer. Ugolino, torn between hunger and love, desire and guilt, perished in a state of extreme physical and psychological distress.

For Rodin, the frustration, guilt, and regret described in Dante's *Inferno* represented the universal suffering of humanity.<sup>60</sup> Rodin's preliminary sketches reveal that he initially intended to organize the *Gates* into discrete panels (Fig. 12), in the tradition of Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*, illustrations of episodes from the New Testament created in the fifteenth century for the baptistery of Florence Cathedral.<sup>61</sup> Instead of designing a sequential narrative, however, Rodin created swirling confusion that functioned as a pictorial metaphor for the uncertainty and suffering that epitomize the human condition. Above the doors sits a figure, an image of melancholy that represents both Dante and Rodin. The unnatural torque of Dante/Rodin's body—right elbow on left thigh—expressed the turmoil of the creative process as well as the modern human psyche. Like the setting in Munch's *Melancholy*, the *Gates* are a giant thought-bubble, a compositional strategy that emerged frequently in Symbolist art as a way of showing the artist's feelings and ideas.





11 Auguste Rodin, *Gates of Hell*, begun 1880, bronze, 600 × 400 × 100 cm. Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, gift of the B. Gerald Cantor Collection (1985.86).



12 Auguste Rodin, *Project for the Gates of Hell with The Thinker, Adam, and Eve*, 1880, pen and brown ink on paper, 16.5 × 11.2 cm. Musée Rodin, Paris (D. 6940). Copyright © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

The Symbolist presumption that images could represent ideas implied the modernist notion that the meaning was contextual: new surroundings produced new meanings. Rodin's practice of combining single figures to make new ones exemplified this concept. The head of Paolo, for example, appears on both the *Prodigal Son* (1880–82, Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and the male figure in *Fugitive Love* (1880–82, Musée Rodin, Paris). The Dante/Rodin figure on the *Gates* has at least three identities depending on context: Dante (on the *Gates*), Rodin (on the *Gates* and as Rodin's grave marker), and, as discrete sculpture, *The Thinker*: a symbol of



thought or melancholy.<sup>62</sup> Rodin would have embraced further interpretations: in a 1911 interview with Paul Gsell, he concurred with Aurier's belief that "the forms [art] created should only provide a pretext for the emotion to expand indefinitely."<sup>63</sup>

## GENIUS

For the Symbolists, art was allied to genius. In his influential book *Contemporary Literature* (1889), Charles Morice asserted: "Genius consists—like Love and Death—in disengaging from accidents, habits, prejudices, conventions, and all the contingencies [in favor of] the element of eternity and unity that lie behind appearances, at the heart of every human essence."<sup>64</sup> Symbolists claimed that insight into the human condition was a special gift—like musical or athletic ability—which distinguished artists of genius. Vanor and Wyzéwa noted the special insight of the true artist-poet, and Aurier—in his landmark article "Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin" (1891)—accorded special status to the artist-genius, citing Gauguin as a prime example. Aurier based his assertion of Symbolism's superiority over Realism and Naturalism on its intellectual roots in the philosophy of Plato (quoting from *The Republic*) and legitimized Symbolist art as "identical to primitive art, to art as it was intuited by the instinctual geniuses of the dawn of humanity."<sup>65</sup>

An aversion to materialism, urbanism, and the rapid pace of modern life stimulated the belief among Symbolists that primitive life—cultures that preceded or were otherwise removed from historical time—was better than that of the present day. This belief was corroborated by the presumed perfection of Paradise and the modernist myth that asserted the simple contentedness of African and Oceanic natives.<sup>66</sup> Aurier considered Symbolist artists superior by virtue of their retention of an original and unmediated relationship with the universe characteristic of children and "primitives," whose demise was an inevitable byproduct of civilization.

Aurier proclaimed: "the strict duty of the ideist painter is to make a reasoned selection from the multiple elements of objective reality,"<sup>67</sup> an oddly conservative strategy rooted in academic practice that Naturalist artists rejected as a deceptive vision of the world. In a further effort to assign Symbolism a rational character, Aurier compared Gauguin favorably to a mathematician and a "scientific genius." Aurier's conservative values contrasted with those of Moréas and Verhaeren, who asserted the primacy of dreams and irrational forces. Aurier's disdain for "the popular herd" betrays an elitist attitude confirmed by his assertion that "only the genius knows how to read" everyday objects as signs of transcendent ideas. As a result, only geniuses could escape the limitations of a superficial, materialistic existence.

Genius came with a price: artist-geniuses risked ridicule, misunderstanding, and even rejection, a situation confirmed by the research of the forensic anthropologist Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso claimed: "And the fact, now unquestioned, that certain great men of genius have been insane, permits us to presume the existence of a lesser degree of psychosis in other men of

genius" in *The Man of Genius* (1889).<sup>68</sup> In fact, Lombroso deemed genius a neurosis.<sup>69</sup> He claimed that Jews had a rate of genius five times higher than the general population, a notion whose implications he explored in *Anti-Semitism and Modern Science* (1894).

## ARTIST AS CREATOR

Optimally, reward for the Symbolist artist-genius came through public appreciation, even veneration: Symbolist literature often refers to the artist as God/creator and Christ/sufferer. In an era of escalating friction between secular and religious interests, Symbolist rhetoric celebrated art as a means of pursuing spirituality. Baudelaire declared: "The imagination is an almost divine faculty which perceives at once, quite without resort to philosophic methods, the intimate and secret connections between things, correspondences and analogies," in the introduction to his 1857 translation of Edgar Allan Poe's writings.<sup>70</sup> Forty years later, Péladan echoed this belief: "Artist, you are a priest: Art is the grand mystery and, as a result of your efforts to create a masterpiece, a ray of divinity descends as on an altar."<sup>71</sup> Artist-geniuses—by virtue of their special insight into life's mysteries—could bypass the usual deductive method of ascertaining truth.

Some of Aurier's ideas were nonetheless radical for their time. He deemed the artist a quasi-divine creator: "ideas—rise out of the darkness, become animated, start living a life—the life of art, the life of being,"<sup>72</sup> an idea in apparent conflict with the notion of the artist-genius as a selector who assembles elements from the visible world in a way that the "popular herd" will find intelligible. Both approaches—the one relying on "concrete phenomena," the other on "an archetypal and complex style"—nonetheless call to mind Moréas's Symbolist manifesto. The bizarre, biological hybrids of Redon fulfilled Aurier's notion of the artist as creator, fabricating new life from the depths of his imagination. During his early career, Redon preferred black and white because they most effectively conveyed the fantastic; color, he felt, referred to the natural world. In his journal *To Oneself* (1922) Redon claimed: "My whole originality therefore consists in making the most implausible beings live human lives according to the laws of the plausible, placing the logic of the visible, insofar as it is possible, at the service of the invisible."<sup>73</sup> Redon followed a conceptual process similar to Rodin's by combining elements from disparate sources. In his charcoal drawing *Cactus Man* (Fig. 13), he produced a hybrid humanoid growing from a planter. His conflation of animal and vegetable recalls the earlier works of Jean Grandville (1803–1847, Fig. 14) and may be indebted to the displays of Africans and Oceanic natives at the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris.<sup>74</sup> The hair-thorns and despondent expression of Redon's figure recall the mocked Christ, evoking Symbolist conceptions of the suffering artist. This hypothesis is supported by Emile Bernard's evaluation of Redon as an unjustly maligned artist: "Loving solitude, misunderstood and rejected due to a lack of public comprehension of his works, he therefore developed and realized that total expansion of himself only by which an artist can achieve originality."<sup>75</sup>



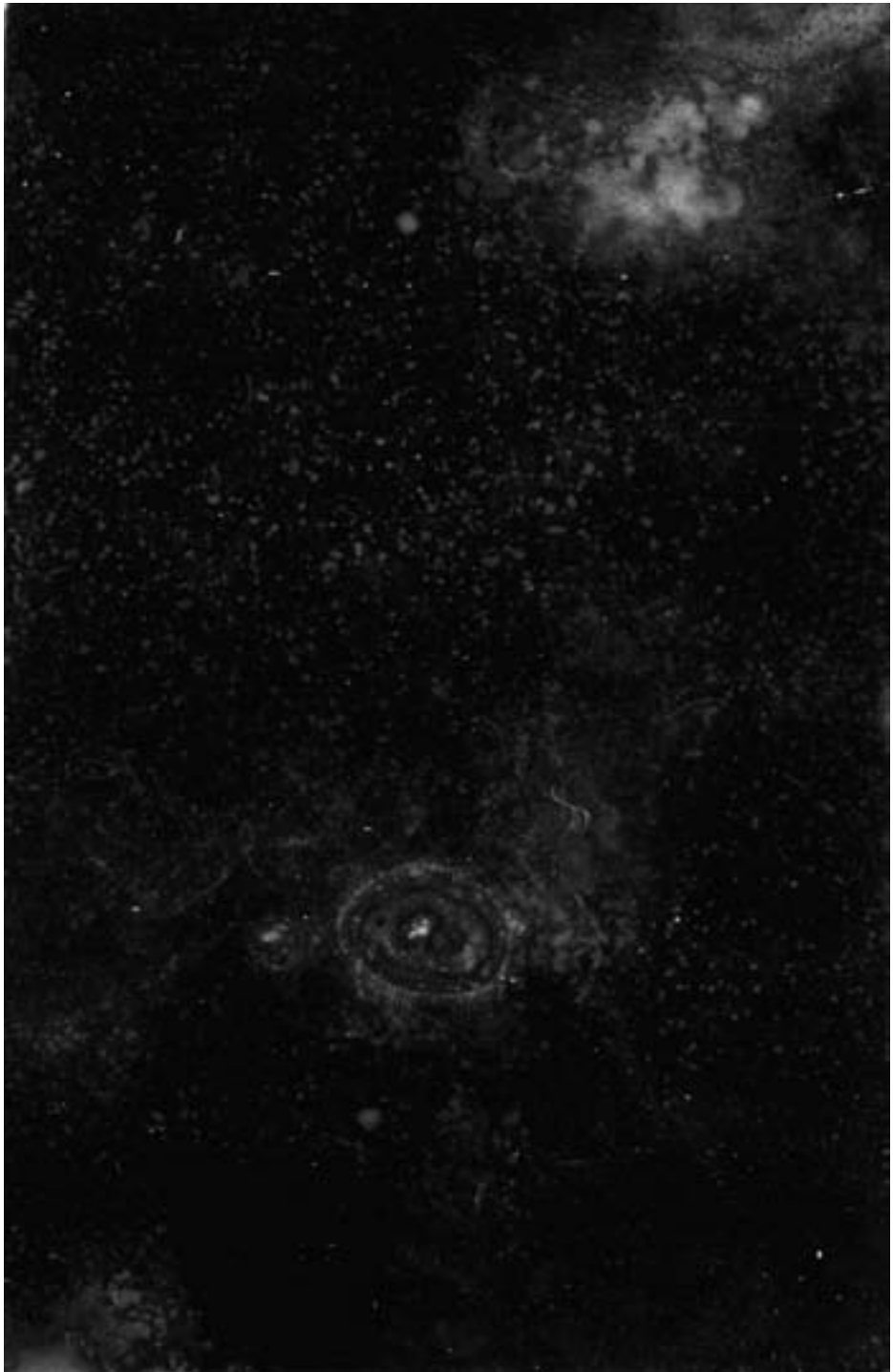
13 Odilon Redon, *Cactus Man*, 1881, various charcoals with stumping, wiping, erasing, incising, and sponge work, on light brown wove paper, 49.0 × 32.2 cm. Woodner Collections. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



14 Jean Grandville, *Newborn Mushrooms*, from *Another World*, 1844. Photo: Per Nordahl.

The planter displays a low-relief scene depicting a woman standing and holding a pole with her left hand while leaning toward a man and grabbing his elbow with her right hand. The man, unsteady on what appear to be stumps severed at the knee, lurches sideways and reaches toward his throat with his free right hand. Does this scene represent a moment from the life of the man whose head rests in the planter? Although the woman appears to be attacking the man, the murky details make it impossible to judge whether Redon represented a familiar story.<sup>76</sup> The artist refused to reveal his intention: Redon suggested but did not state. Odd juxtapositions combine with a technique of visible, multidirectional strokes and unfinished contours to distinguish the image from the natural world. Redon's use of charcoal, a medium considered appropriate only for preliminary studies, indicates a subversive technique as well as subject matter.

The assertion that an artist's creative powers were divine, arrogant though it might seem, found a measure of support in contemporary scientific findings. The research of the Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov in the 1870s suggested that animals draw logical conclusions about experiences and modify their behavior accordingly.<sup>77</sup> Pavlov's findings required the formulation of new criteria for differentiating human intellect from animal thought processes. Many investigators concluded that the decisive criterion was creativity rather than a capacity for rational thought, as had long been assumed. According to this hypothesis, because the greatest act of the Creator had been the creation of the world, the artist who drew on his imagination to envision new worlds took full advantage of human potential. As Gauguin explained in an



15 August Strindberg, *Celestograph*, 1894. Strindberg Museum, Stockholm.

August 14, 1888, letter to Emile Schuffenecker: “think more about the act of creation than about the rest; it is the only way to ascend to God while imitating our divine master in the process of creation.”<sup>78</sup>

This paradigm of imitating the process rather than the appearance of nature was crucial for some Symbolist artists. Auguste Strindberg (1849–1912) advised in his November 1894 essay “New Directions in Art! Or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation”: “Imitate nature in an appropriate way, imitate in particular nature’s way of creating!”<sup>79</sup> Strindberg did this in plays, short stories, paintings, and experimental photographs. Among the latter were Strindberg’s “celestographs”: images fixed on photographic plates exposed to the night sky without the intermediary of a lens or camera. They reflect a similarly nonconformist pursuit of scientific experimentation as a means of original creation (Fig. 15). To make them, Strindberg poured salt solutions onto glass plates, allowed the solutions to crystallize, and printed them on photographic paper, a process motivated by a conviction that Strindberg shared with Wyzewa: “every molecule contains the handwriting of the universe.” To Strindberg, the serendipitous assemblage of mineral salts into landscapelike compositions confirmed creativity’s source in unconscious processes that corresponded to divine creativity. His disregard for conventional imagery and artistic processes affirmed his freedom from authority and validated his individualism. These values harmonized with political anarchism, which envisioned an egalitarian society of happy, healthy individuals that functioned in a collaborative and altruistic manner, free from the oppression of central governments.<sup>80</sup> For Symbolists, the divine gifts of insight and invention were a blessing and a curse. In an 1899 biography, *The “Christ” of Carrière*, Charles Morice compared the painter Eugène Carrière (1849–1906)—ignored, condemned, and finally respected—to Christ,<sup>81</sup> who had been described in similar terms by the French archaeologist Ernest Renan in his pioneering work of biblical archaeology, *Life of Jesus* (1863).

Gauguin’s *Agony in the Garden* (Fig. 16) represented the artist as a selfless savior of humanity.<sup>82</sup> Gauguin depicted Christ in his final days of psychological and physical anguish, using his own visage for Christ’s, evidenced by the prominent nose and sturdy physique. Here Christ awaits betrayal by Judas, who accompanies the Roman soldiers in the background. Christ’s bright cap of red hair and the coarsely woven brushstrokes in nonnatural colors signal to the viewer that Gauguin’s purpose was not simple description. In a November 1889 letter to Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), Gauguin confided, “This canvas is fated to be misunderstood, so I shall keep it for a long time.”<sup>83</sup> In an interview published in *L’Echo de Paris* in 1891, he described the painting as a visualization of a feeling: “The crushing of an ideal, and a pain that is both divine and human.”<sup>84</sup> *Agony in the Garden* might equally be an illustration of the Passion, a self-portrait, or a display of raw emotion. Gauguin conflated past and present, sacred and profane, in representing himself as Christ. His dual sense of isolation and mission was typical of Symbolist artists, who depicted Saint Anthony—the hermit saint tortured by (imaginary) demons—almost as frequently as the suffering Christ. In a materialistic world in which art no longer served church and state, artists risked marginalization and commoditization. Attributing to themselves the divine power of genius—through which they could





16 Paul Gauguin, *Agony in the Garden*, 1889, oil on canvas, 72.4 × 91.4 Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, Gift of Elizabeth C. Norton (46.5).

enlighten and perhaps even save humanity—not only defined a social role for artists but elevated them to the status of spiritual leaders.

In an 1891 *Mercure de France* article, Aurier set forth the parameters of Symbolist art:

Ideist, since its unique ideal is the expression of the idea;

Symbolist, since it expresses the idea by means of forms;

Synthetic, since it writes out those forms, these signs, according to a mode susceptible to general comprehension;

Subjective, since the object depicted is not considered as an object, but as a sign of an idea perceived by the subject [viewer];

And consequently decorative—insofar as decorative painting . . . is only a manifestation of an art that is simultaneously subjective, synthetic, symbolist, and ideist.<sup>85</sup>

Aurier's summary was both authoritative and influential; it has been the basis for discussions of Symbolist art ever since its publication. His description of Symbolism as “ideist”—intended to convey an idea (rather than imitate nature)—articulated the most fundamental principle of



Symbolist art. That Symbolist art expressed ideas and was “subjective” would not have been contested. But the proposition that Symbolism should be “synthetic” and therefore generally comprehensible was not shared by reclusive Symbolists concerned primarily with exploring their own imaginations or expressing metaphysical concepts—in other words, artists whose “ideas rise out of the darkness.” Aurier’s support of Synthetism as an appropriate technique or medium of expression resulted from his desire to promote artists like Gauguin who belonged to the “concrete” camp of Symbolism.

To Aurier, art that was ideist, symbolist, synthetist, and subjective was intrinsically decorative—a concept quite different from the pejorative connotation with which that term is now burdened. During the late nineteenth century, however, “decorative” was opposed to “imitative,” and indicated reliance on imagination rather than sense perception. The British poet and playwright Oscar Wilde observed that “art begins with abstract decoration with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent.”<sup>86</sup> Gauguin included flowers in the background of *Spirit of the Dead Watching* to satisfy his “decorative sense.” Decoration resulted when an artist-genius was guided by his aesthetic instinct. Despite its modern elements, Symbolism’s roots were embedded in earlier aesthetic and philosophical currents, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Symbolism arose first in Paris as the city was undergoing unprecedented demographic and physical changes during the second half of the nineteenth century. Throughout Europe, a combination of demographic, economic, and political circumstances reduced the individual to the cash value of his labor. Writers were the first to lament the condition of Western society, and Moréas’s manifesto on Symbolism coincided with a surge of Symbolist art and literature, which often idealized temporally or physically remote cultures. Although no single definition of Symbolism emerged, artists and intellectuals distinguished it from Naturalism, whose preoccupation with visible reality, they believed, led to degeneration, materialism, and superficiality. Symbolists advocated turning inward, to the worlds of dream and imagination; thought and feeling took precedence over action. Symbolists accorded privileged (genius) status to individuals able to penetrate appearances in order to reveal underlying, eternal truths, the recognition of which were essential to humanity’s salvation. The special powers of such individuals endowed them with a creative ability comparable to the Creator’s. Because their contemporaries often failed to appreciate the efforts of such geniuses, they often envisioned themselves as martyrs, even as Christ figures.