

ROMANTIC SYMBOLISTS

“Our true fathers were Balzac and the Parnassians for the poets, Stendhal and some Mérimée or other for the analysts. . . . Zola . . . unconsciously turned art into the equivalent of the beautiful power of a motor.” So wrote the Belgian symbolist poet Albert Mockel in 1887,¹ thus distancing himself from Emile Zola, the acknowledged leader of naturalism, and locating the origins of symbolism in the endeavors of the Parnassians—poets still in the mainstream of romanticism who nevertheless undertook to control the emotional exuberance of that movement in both content and style—and in romanticism itself, as Mockel acknowledged in his references to Stendhal and Prosper Mérimée.

Mockel’s inclusion of Honoré de Balzac may seem surprising since that novelist, although fully in the romantic tradition in evoking passion in the various strata of society, paid so much attention to observed detail as to be a forerunner of the naturalists’ cult of the here and now. But Balzac also had a mystical side, as evinced in his *Séraphita* (1832) and *Louis Lambert* (1835). These two novels were in keeping with the rejection of materialism, already apparent in mainstream romanticism, that became a central theme of both Parnassian and symbolist poetry.

The novelist Gustave Flaubert, although not mentioned by Mockel, cannot be ignored. More than Balzac he dealt—sometimes ironically—with the minutiae of life. And he succeeded in rendering even more poignant visions of grand human drama. In his *Salammbô* of 1863 he took delight in the apparently impassive evocation of barbaric myths and in the meticulous enumeration of archaeological features to compose a drama of epic proportions. Furthermore, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (a version was serialized in 1856–57; the definitive text appeared in 1874) presented jestingly, dramatically, and above all with sometimes painful self-revelation Flaubert’s bitter disillusionment about worldly pursuits in the detailed narrative of an early Christian hermit saint’s resistance to temptation.

The French Parnassians first gathered around *La Revue fantaisiste*, founded by the poet Catulle Mendès in 1859, and later published their works in the volumes of *Le Parnasse contemporain*—whence their name—which appeared from 1866 through 1876. Their leaders were Charles Leconte de Lisle, Théophile Gautier, Théodore de Banville, José-Maria de Heredia, Sully Prudhomme, and François Coppée. Baudelaire and the symbolists-to-be Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé were also included. The first Parnassians, according to the poet, novelist, and critic Paul Bourget, had taken a stand against the “passionate and audacious curiosity about the elements of daily life” and the “unrelenting dedication to analysis” characteristic of the naturalist and positivist circles of the time. They were nevertheless idealists, who defended “the noble and deceptive chimeras of romanticism” and advocated “a renewal of faith” in it and “an effort to renew learned and sophisticated poetry.”² Much of their work was pervaded by a gentle pessimism. Among those welcomed by the somewhat eclectic group were the artists Edouard Manet and Henri Fantin-Latour, both of whom were linked with the beginnings of impressionism, as well as a number of musicians.³

A decade or so later, the symbolist critic and poet Achille Delaroche explained, in writing about Leconte de Lisle, some of the differences between full-blown romantic poetry and Parnassian poetry, which his generation, incidentally, already found outmoded: “All feeling was carefully excluded from his work as parasitic. Even the gestures of humanity acquired for him the impassiveness of natural phenomena, unfolding in his verse as if they were landscapes of blood, bronze, and granite whose moral value is no more evolved than that of the flora and fauna that take part in the perpetual fantasy of universal transformism.”⁴ Verlaine alluded to the impassivity of the Parnassians and to the near-classical polish of their prosody in a half-jesting, half-admiring sally, according to an editor of Verlaine’s poems, directed at a poem by Leconte de Lisle of 1867 named after the Graeco-Roman statue at the Louvre that it evokes: “Is it of marble or not, the Venus of Milo?”⁵

In sum, the younger generation undoubtedly saw the Parnassians as dedicated to the resonances and meter of traditional prosody, to the detriment of the freedom of form; so coldly archaeological in their treatment of ancient myths and fables as to fetter their own and their readers’ flights of imagination and thus all play of associations; and so impassive as to preclude the intense subjectivity characteristic of Baudelaire and his later admirers.

The Parnassians themselves might have defended their impassivity as a reaction to romantic exuberance of form and expression, arguing that their leaders, at least, remained exalted at heart, thus announcing the *dédoublement* of the symbolist psyche. Although the Parnassians valued polished form and traditional craftsmanship in protest against the emotional and stylistic exu-

berance of the Romantics, they still attached much importance to musicality. Indeed Banville, admittedly writing in 1881, claimed that “there is no poetry and no verse outside of song.”⁶

The Parnassians’ attitude toward ancient myths implied a renewed awareness of their appeal. For Louis Ménard, a poet and a historian of religion as well as a distinguished scientist who was a friend of Leconte de Lisle’s, ancient myths were “sets of symbols, that is, ideas expressed in concrete form.” Myth, he added, has the same impact as religious instruction: it addresses itself

not to reason, as does the teaching of philosophy, but to all faculties at once; it acts through the senses on the imagination, the heart, and the intelligence. The great mysteries of nature, light, movement, life cannot be proved; they assert themselves. Likewise symbols, which are the human expression of divine laws, cannot be proved; they merely reveal themselves, and conviction descends of its own accord in the souls that are prepared to receive them.⁷

Thus the ancient myths reaffirmed the age-old play of associations that the younger generation had adopted so willingly from romanticism; and, more important, they were potent reminders of the sacredness ascribed to that play by early prophets and poets.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who towered over British poetry at mid-century, was, broadly speaking, the contemporary of the Parnassians and shared some of their ideals. The succeeding generation of English poets—the Pre-Raphaelites—came to appreciate developments in France after two Francophiles and Baudelairean enthusiasts, Algernon Charles Swinburne and, later, Walter Pater, became their friends. Swinburne and Pater gave the British aesthetic movement its main impulse.

The aesthetic views of an important presymbolist group of painters and sculptors corresponded to those of the Parnassians. They too can be included among the romantic symbolists. These artists, like the Parnassian poets, were rooted in romanticism. And like the Parnassians, they reacted against the spread of naturalism, blossoming forth in the 1860s and 1870s into its most seductive offshoot, impressionism. Their stress on musicality, the play of associations, a sense of mystery, and subjectivity, furthermore, relates their aesthetic views to those of Baudelaire and Delacroix. And their works were also dominated by dreams and daydreams, frequently echoing mythical and religious themes. These works evoke the states of the soul, specifically that of the artist, in keeping with the tradition of romanticism.

Romantic-symbolist artists were as reluctant as the literary Parnassians to display the emotional turbulence of the romantics—hence a similar stress on impassivity, often verging on somnambulism. Indeed, the figures in

their works usually appear detached and self-absorbed, wrapped up in their own thoughts, however dramatic the subject of the work might be. This last trait in itself implies an element of *dédoublement*, since such figures seem at once to participate in an action and to meditate on their predicament.

In style these artists shared the Parnassians' respect for traditional form in most of their works, avoiding both Delacroix's turbulent drawing and his audacious juxtaposition of hues. Like the Parnassians, they frequently borrowed from earlier traditions; they remained essentially faithful to the simple value-modeling of masses that originated in the early Renaissance, but they occasionally emulated the elegant linear patterning and the ornate jewel-strewn surfaces of such quattrocento artists as Mantegna and Crivelli. At times decorative affectations in the handling of lines and surfaces and eerie exaggerations of light-dark contrasts point to Mannerism. But the romantic symbolists never quite abandoned the essentially naturalist handling of masses in space of the early Renaissance; and they treated light and atmosphere with the relative consistency of that period, even though their lighting could be eerie and their shadows ominous.

It is tempting to include Delacroix himself among the romantic symbolists; the only grounds on which to keep him out are stylistic. For unlike Ingres, he never attempted to emulate the manner of the *quattrocento*. What is more, his ebullient execution, which often followed baroque principles, reflected the emotional exaltation of romanticism. Aside from these characteristics, his *Sardanapalus* of 1827 (Fig. 2) meets the criteria of romantic symbolism. Its sumptuous, richly sensuous, and sometimes brutal color achieves a splendid musicality; such suggestive forms as the flamelike bodies of the women convey, by the play of associations, both intense sensuality and the promise of the ordeal by fire to come;⁸ the overall confusion and the apparent conflict between indices of pleasure and intimations of pain contribute to a sense of mystery; the despot's contemplative response to a veritable onslaught on the senses echoes Delacroix's own combination of phlegm and sensuality and points to his subjective approach. Such impassivity is in keeping with Parnassian ideals; paired with the dramatic turbulence of Delacroix's subject, it constitutes a prime example of *dédoublement*. The artist's description of the work in the 1827 Salon catalogue corroborates this interpretation. The monarch—briefly mentioned in the Bible and eventually the hero of a poem by Byron—when his palace was surrounded by his enemies, ordered that “his women, pages, even his horses and favorite dogs be slain; that none of the objects that had given him pleasure survive him; [and that] his chamberlain set his bed afire and throw himself upon it.”⁹ Thus he takes an active part in a dramatic grand finale, quietly watching as it unfolds.

Théodore Chassériau, Ingres's pupil and a friend and follower of Dela-



2. Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 395 × 495 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo copyright R.M.N.

. . . the supernatural sensual delight man can experience at the sight of his own blood . . .

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croix, played a leading role in fostering romantic symbolism in the arts. Gustave Moreau and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Chassériau's friends and disciples, must have been particularly impressed by his large, complex allegorical compositions. A third major romantic symbolist, Odilon Redon, wrote effusively of the impact Delacroix had had on him.

For the sake of chronology the Pre-Raphaelites, the closest British equivalents to the romantic-symbolist artists, are discussed first.