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# The Symbolist aesthetic and the impact of occult and esoteric ideologies on modern art

Within the past couple of decades, art-historical scholarship has developed a more acute awareness of the need to reassess and re-evaluate its dominant narratives. It has become apparent that the value judgements that have guided modernist historiography can no longer be taken for granted, and there has been an ever-increasing demand for more diverse perspectives. One central issue which has gradually surfaced into broader consciousness, is the impact of occult and esoteric ideas on artistic theories and practices since the late nineteenth century. This article looks into the background of this phenomenon, locating a point of culmination in the new Symbolist direction of art that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century. The aim is to demonstrate that central Symbolist principles, such as inwardness, intuition, and dematerialisation are linked with popular esoteric beliefs, and that the late nineteenth-century aesthetic theorisations of these issues have had significant effects on later artistic developments. The artists of this new movement were no longer satisfied with the old 'window on the world' paradigm. Instead of copying a tangible reality as it appeared to their eyes, they turned inward, towards the world of dreams, fantasies and nightmares, visions and hallucinations, ancient myths and fairy tales. But they were not merely looking for new kinds of subject matter in order to 'shock the bourgeoisie'. The innovative aesthetic attitude that they developed in both theory and practice rested on a philosophical foundation that was deeply rooted in occult and esoteric ideologies and their quest for new directions and forms of expression in art was paralleled by an intensive religious searching.

## Introduction

Within the past couple of decades, art-historical scholarship has developed a more acute awareness of the need to reassess and re-evaluate its dominant narratives. It has become apparent that the value judgements that have guided modernist historiography can no longer be taken for granted, and there has been an ever-increasing demand for a wider range of perspectives. One topic that has gradually surfaced into broader consciousness is the impact of occult and esoteric<sup>1</sup> ideas on artistic theories and practices. This reflects a broader ideological shift within Western culture. As Wouter Hanegraaff has demonstrated, esoteric movements have typically been viewed as reactionary, irrational, and potentially dangerous, and after the Second World War they came to be associated with the kind of irrationalism that gave birth to Nazism. Hence, for centuries these cultural aspects have been pushed into the margins of Western civilisation.<sup>2</sup> At this very moment, however, a certain change of attitude appears to be in effect, and it looks like these formerly ostracised elements of Western art and culture are slowly emerging into the mainstream. This can be seen reflected, for instance, in several recent art exhibitions that have touched on

- 1 The term *esoteric* is used here in a general sense to refer to Western traditions of religious secrecy and the idea that there are deeper 'inner mysteries of religion' as opposed to the external or 'exoteric' religious practice. *Occultism* refers more specifically to nineteenth-century developments of this phenomenon (Hanegraaff 2006a, 2006b). It should be noted that the focus of this article is exclusively European and relates specifically to Western esotericism.
- 2 Hanegraaff 2012; see also Treitel 2004, Staudenmeier 2014.

the subject either as a historical phenomenon or as part of contemporary artistic practice: *Intuition* at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice (2017), *As Above, So Below: Portals, Visions, Spirits & Mystics* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (2017), *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897* at Guggenheim, New York (2017), and MoMA's exhibition of Tony Oursler's cinematic work *Imponderable* (2015–16) with its alternative view of modernism as an intersection of technological advancements and occult phenomena – to name just a few examples of this new-found fascination with esoteric phenomena that has revived many of the debates that nourished the genesis of modern art.

Even if it was marginalised, the esoteric strand continued to exist as an undercurrent in both art-historical scholarship and artistic practice throughout the twentieth century, and it came to be associated with abstract art in particular. The purpose of this article, however, is to contribute towards a somewhat different narrative. It locates a point of culmination in the late nineteenth-century Symbolist aesthetic and aims to demonstrate that the Symbolist quest for the invisible and inexpressible was deeply influenced by occult ideologies. Moreover, this inward turn was reflected in an increasing questioning of established norms of pictorial representation, one of the principal features being the introduction of a new kind of visual ambiguity. These theoretical issues will be explored through an examination of a number of Symbolist artworks by the Finnish artists Magnus Enckell (1870–1925), Pekka Halonen (1865–1933), and Beda Stjernschantz (1867–1910). All three studied in Paris in the early years of the 1890s where they were soon swept into the artistic underworld buzzing with new ideas. Also in late nineteenth-century Finland, various esoteric currents were gaining an increasingly strong foothold. Spiritualism, theosophy, Tolstoyanism, and diverse phenomena described as 'parapsychology' were among subjects that aroused heated discussions. These new ideologies were disseminated through public talks and lectures and numerous articles in newspapers and periodicals (Kokkinen 2011: 46–7).

This article sheds light on material that for a long time has remained overlooked in mainstream art history. The artworks that are examined offer an incredibly rich basis for a discussion that can then be lifted to a more general level. The questions concerning the relationship between Symbolism and

occultism that this article seeks to address are by no means limited to the Finnish context. However, this choice of material highlights the geographical diversity of the Symbolist phenomenon. This is an aspect that has gradually gained more emphasis in Symbolism scholarship (e.g. Ehrhardt and Reynolds 2000, Rapetti 2005, Facos 2009, Fowle 2012, Anker 2013, Facos and Mednick 2015). The new wave of research has revealed that this artistic current, which was previously considered to be mainly French, was in fact a truly transnational phenomenon. In Finland, the Symbolist movement became a dominant artistic current in the 1890s and it completely revolutionised the art world, as has been demonstrated by Salme Sarajas-Korte in her pioneering studies conducted during the 1960s (Sarajas-Korte 1966; see also Lahelma 2014). Sarajas-Korte also noted the widespread esoteric influence on Symbolism – an aspect which at that time was quite far from being in the mainstream of art-historical debate.

### Subversive Symbolism

In the context of abstract art, the impact of esoteric and occult ideas on artistic practices has been noted since the 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, curated by Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles County Museum). The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue were deeply influenced by Sixten Ringbom's groundbreaking study *The Sounding Cosmos* (1970). Ringbom's argument about the great significance of occultism for the genesis of abstract art had initially caused controversy and was to a large extent dismissed by the scholarly community, although it was importantly taken up by Linda Dalrymple Henderson in her seminal work *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (1983).<sup>3</sup> After the 1986 exhibition the connection between occultism and modern art has gradually gained more widespread acceptance and the issue has been addressed in exhibitions and publications that have also widened the scope beyond abstraction and even beyond visual art.<sup>4</sup> Most studies have concentrated on abstraction,

3 Henderson also contributed to *The Spiritual in Art Catalogue* (Henderson 1986) and she edited the spring 1987 special issue of *The Art Bulletin* on the theme of mysticism and occultism (Henderson 1987).

4 For example, *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* (Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt 1995), *Traces du Sacré* (Centre

while more recently an increasing amount of attention has also been drawn to the links between occultism and Surrealism (e.g. Rabinovitch 2002, Bauduin 2014, Bauduin *et al.* 2018). When Symbolism has been included in these discussions it has often been presented as a basis for the development of abstract art. This was the approach taken in *The Spiritual in Art* exhibition, and Maurice Tuchman, for instance, has argued in his catalogue essay that ‘the most fertile aesthetic source for abstract artists working in the first two decades of the twentieth century was Symbolist painting and theory’ and that Symbolism ‘contained the seeds of abstract art’ (Tuchman 1986: 37). Indeed, it is a well-known fact that many pioneers of abstract art, such as Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, and František Kupka began their artistic careers within the Symbolist context. However, what I find problematic in this mode of argumentation is that Symbolism is treated as nothing but a prologue to abstraction. This attitude makes it too easy to dismiss, or perceive as reactionary, those aesthetic transformations that did not lead the way to abstraction.

Filiz Eda Burhan examines the connections between Symbolist art and the late nineteenth-century ‘occult revival’ in her doctoral thesis on the intellectual background of the Symbolist aesthetic (1979), which despite its insightful approach has remained relatively unknown. Burhan argues that psychological theory and the new-found interest in esoteric traditions provided for the Symbolist artists and theorists many of the central ideas in their aesthetic programme. She also noted the inherent links between occultism and modern science, particularly psychology – an issue that has more recently been discussed at length by Alex Owen (2004). Burhan maintains that the Symbolist definition of art as a symbolic representation that reveals a correspondence between the artist’s subjective emotional state and a larger totality of nature could be conceptualised in both psychological and occultist terms; both emphasise the subjective nature of vision, and the ability of the human mind to operate with visual symbols (Burhan 1979: 67–148). Another important early contribution to this field was Robert Pincus-Witten’s 1968 dissertation on Joséphin Péladan, the French author, occultist, and organiser of Rosicrucian art

salons. Péladan’s salons, which by the time Pincus-Witten set to work on his thesis had been all-but forgotten and written out of the history of modern art, provided a significant platform for Symbolist art and they attracted large numbers of visitors. Despite the dogmatic character of Péladan’s theory – he advocated a return to tradition, believing that the absolute peak of art had already been achieved in the art of the Italian Renaissance – and even if many artists wished to keep a certain distance from him and his salons, he was a highly influential figure in fin-de-siècle Paris. Towards the end of the 1890s he started to fall more and more out of fashion, and subsequently many artists wanted to avoid being associated with him, although a few years earlier they may have been among his admirers. However, Magnus Enckell, whose works will be discussed below, was one of the few artists who fully acknowledged Péladan’s centrality for his artistic development. Of particular significance for Enckell and many other Symbolist artists was Péladan’s theory of ideal androgyny, which was deeply influenced by the occult notion of the unity of opposites (Sarajas-Korte 1966: 43–5, 84–9; Pincus-Witten 1968: 44).

Pincus-Witten’s and Burhan’s studies remained isolated cases for a long time, but within the past decade or so, Symbolism scholarship has become more broadly aware of issues relating to esotericism. Michel Facos, for instance, included a section on occultism and theosophy in her 2009 book *Symbolist Art in Context*. Although she does not attempt to present an exhaustive survey of the subject, she, quite correctly, connects the interest in occultism with the pursuit of expressing the invisible by the means of art (Facos 2009: 101–4; see also Clerbois 2005; Davenport 2007; Keshavjee 2009; Morehead 2009, 2017; Morehead and Otto 2015). The artists associated with the Symbolist movement were no longer satisfied with the old ‘window on the world’ paradigm. Instead of copying a tangible reality as it appeared to their eyes, they turned inward, towards the world of dreams, fantasies and nightmares, visions and hallucinations, ancient myths and fairy tales. But they were not only looking for new kinds of subject matter in order to ‘shock the bourgeoisie’. The Symbolist aesthetic contained subversive elements that contributed towards a newly-formulated understanding of the significance of art and the role of the artist as an exceptional individual. The innovative aesthetic attitude that they developed in both theory and practice

Pompidou, Paris 2008), *L’Europe des esprits ou la fascination de l’occulte, 1750-1950* (Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain de la Ville de Strasbourg, 2012).

rested on a philosophical foundation that was deeply rooted in occult and esoteric ideologies. Their quest for new directions and forms of expression in art was paralleled by an intensive religious searching. Artists typically did not commit to one belief system, but rather drew ideas from different directions according to their own subjective vision. A book on the 'little religions of Paris', published by the renowned French occultist Jules Bois (1915), paints a vibrant picture of various cults and movements, from the 'last pagans' to Swedenborgians, Buddhists, theosophists, satanists, gnostics, and so on. These kinds of more personalised forms of religion provided much-needed strategies for making sense of the modern world – and the new art had the potential to serve a similar purpose. When these two combined, art also appeared as a new religion and the artists were its prophets.

While it is impossible to establish a clearly-definable philosophical foundation for the Symbolist aesthetic, this diversity should not blind us to the aspects held in common between the various artistic and theoretical dimensions associated with Symbolism. The propensity to talk about vague mysticism and spirituality in relation to the Symbolist movement and modern art in general has certainly created further confusion. It would be beneficial to take a more systematic approach when analysing this intellectual setting. Here the introduction of the concept of 'occulture' into the study of modern art and religion may be useful (Kokkinen 2012, 2013). As a combination of the terms 'occultism' and 'culture', this term draws attention to the popularity of these ideologies; they are not perceived as marginal but as a central element of Western culture. In addition, 'occulture' questions the notion of secularisation by identifying a change in religious culture rather than a waning of religiosity. Christopher Partridge has defined 'occulture' as 'a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices and symbols' (Partridge 2004: 84). When this notion is put to work in the study of modern art, it can give artists a more active role as modifiers and producers of modern religiosity (Kokkinen 2013: 22).

Riikka Stewen has pointed out that while Symbolism propagated highly personal choices, there was also a kind of family resemblance between its proponents. One of the most fundamental underlying issues is the interconnectedness of artistic, scientific and religious discourses (Stewen 2014: 4–5). Because

of its 'mystical' orientation and highly subjective approach, Symbolism has often been understood as being 'anti-scientific'. This is however an oversimplification of the case. Symbolist artists and critics were opposed to the positivist attitude that they associated with all negative aspects of modernity. The Symbolist poet, author, and critic Albert Aurier (1865–92) stated that mysticism alone had the potential to save modern society from the brutality, sensuality, and utilitarianism brought on by positivist science (Aurier 1893: 201). However, the opposition to science was often most of all a question of rhetoric. The positivistic science of the day constituted a useful opponent in the artists' self-reflections, but in truth they utilised many scientific ideas in their art (see e.g. Keshavjee 2015, Larson 2005, Morehead 2017). According to Aurier, mathematics was the only true science, and he conceived it to be closely related to mysticism. It was an exact and rational science whereas the modern natural sciences, 'the obtuse bastards of science', were inexact and incapable of producing accurate solutions; hence they inevitably led to scepticism and a fear of thinking (Aurier 1893: 175). Occult movements, such as theosophy, insisted on being scientific and rational, but in a different and more profound sense than positivist science. The aim was to re-establish the links between science and religion that had been lost with the Enlightenment project and particularly with positivism (Owen 2004: 238–57). In fact, the Symbolist movement in art had a mission which was shared with both modern science and occultism; in their unique yet not entirely separate ways they all strove to reveal unknown and invisible worlds. Scientists and occultists alike were discovering invisible energies flowing through matter, such as x-rays, ectoplasm, electricity, or magnetic fluid. The occultists held that these recent scientific discoveries were nothing but new formulations of knowledge that had previously been part of a secret doctrine and available only to initiates. They understood scientific explorations into the realm of the invisible to be evidence that modern science was getting ever closer to ancient wisdom (Williams 2003: 160–1; Owen 2004: 34–40; Facos 2009: 101–3). To complete this task, modern science would have to let go of the external, the surface of things, and instead, like the science of the ancient temples, concentrate on revealing the invisible. This notion was popularised by the French poet and occultist Edouard Schuré in his bestselling book *The Great Initiates* (*Les Grands Initiés*, 1889).

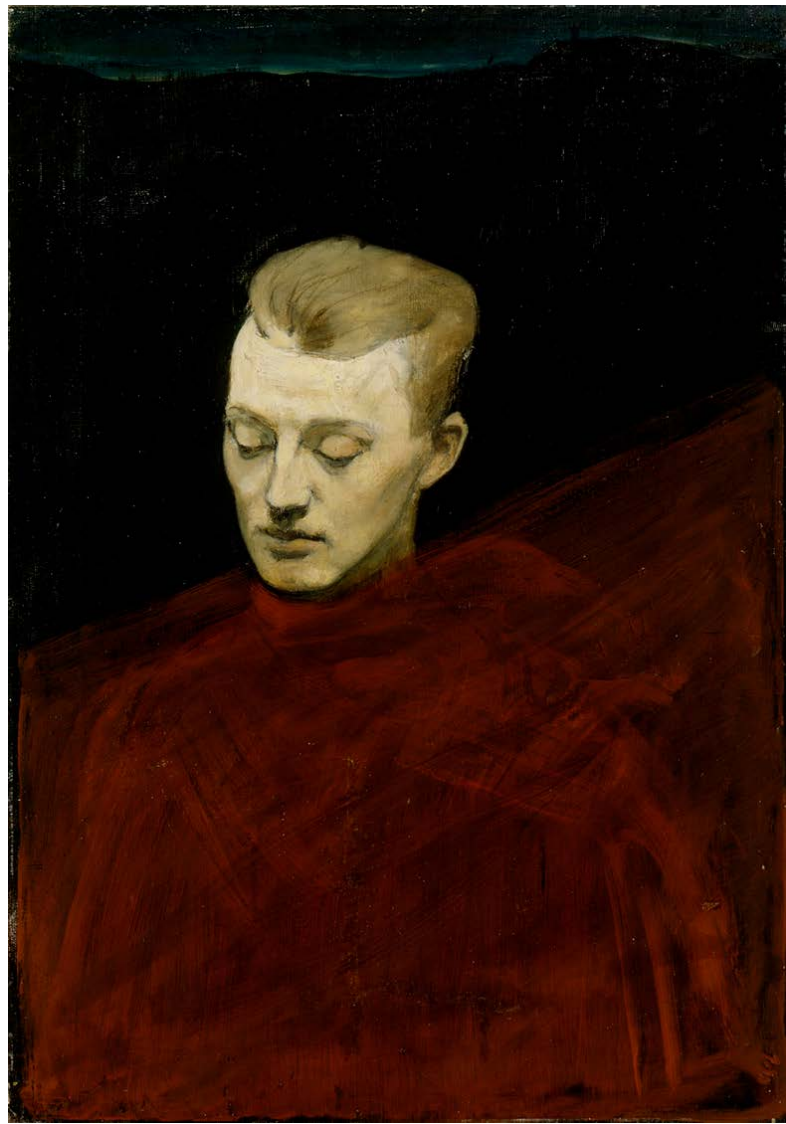


The worldview that was generated around these ideas was compatible with modern science but left room for the unknown. It is easy to see why this would appeal to artists who were not content with copying the objects of the visible world, but were searching for revelation through their art.

### Inner vision, imagination, and the theory of correspondences

Magnus Enckell's notebook from his early years in Paris offers a fascinating glimpse into the Parisian atmosphere that at the time was saturated with diverse artistic, philosophical, and religious ideologies. Enckell translated the intellectual impulses that he encountered into a deeply personal language, which means that it is often impossible to track down the original sources. However, certain ideas are expressed in a manner that clearly reflects a familiarity with esoteric and occult theories. Enckell presents himself as a neophyte in the process of initiation, entering the ruins of an ancient pagan temple, moving from room to room and ever further into the depths of the unknown. With every step he suffers, having to let go of earthly pleasures, hopes and aspirations, but he goes on with the firm belief that he will get his reward when he reaches the final room, the innermost sanctum: 'Everything will be revealed to our eyes and restored to our hearts. Time will no longer exist' (Sarajas-Korte 1966: 157–9; Sarajas-Korte 1995: 286). Around the same time, his art took a decidedly Symbolist turn. The painting *Head* (1894, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki), a portrait of the artist Bruno Aspelin, seems almost like a manifesto of this new direction. The extremely simplified composition creates an evocative atmosphere; a solitary, androgynous head floats between a red and a black area which splits the canvas diagonally into two parts. The luminous face is seen in three-quarter view with closed eyes and a serene, enlightened expression.

The motif of the closed eyes became almost a Symbolist cliché. It is often encountered in extremely simplified works with a limited colour scheme and minimal narrative content, showing only the face, and sometimes the neck and a bit of the shoulders of the human figure (Stewen 1996: 18). The most famous example is Odilon Redon's painting *Closed Eyes* (1890, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) which has become an emblem of Symbolist art and aesthetics (Leeman



Magnus Enckell, *Head (Bruno Aspelin)*, 1894, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 57 cm, Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jukka Romu.

2011: 228–9; Wittlich 1995).<sup>5</sup> This painting represents an androgynous figure with closed eyes and a calm, dreamy expression against a pale blue background. Only the head and shoulders are visible, the rest of the body is hidden below the surface of water. Enckell's *Head* has a similarly simplified composition. Petr Wittlich has noted that the theme of Redon's painting, the interconnectedness of the visible and the invisible, finds expression on two levels. First, through the painting technique, 'in the luminous

5 I am referring here to the most famous version of this image. Redon made several versions of the work, the first of which is from 1889 and known as *Au ciel*.

sfumato that seems to waver between line and a range of colours that scarcely strays from grey, giving the picture its general atmosphere and its impression of perceptible silence and spatial ambiguity'. Second, it is manifested in the concrete symbols of closed eyes and the water's surface, suggesting two levels of existence. The 'cosmic sleeper' is between two worlds, the visible and the invisible (Wittlich 1995: 235). Similarly, in Enckell's painting the closed eyes and the diagonally split colour fields appear as a concrete symbol suggesting the theme of the painting. This thematic dimension is enforced by the indeterminacy of the work's structure: the ambiguous scenery in the background, the unreal setting, and the layers of *pentimenti* that make the viewer aware of the artistic and intellectual process behind the finished work.

The question of directly signifying form has been one of the burning issues in both the theory and practice of abstract art. Ringbom was the first scholar to offer a thorough scrutiny of this issue in connection to esoteric phenomena. He addressed it in *The Sounding Cosmos* and many subsequent publications, noting, for instance, how Kandinsky employed occultist visual material, such as Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater's 'thought-forms' to express the interconnectedness of inner and outer elements. For Kandinsky, form was 'the outer expression of inner content' (Ringbom 1969: 120; see also Ringbom 1986 and 1989: 33–78). Besant and Leadbeater's publication on thought-forms did not appear until 1901, but the notion of externalised thoughts already existed in late nineteenth-century occultism. The Nabi artists' method of employing geometrical forms as a kind of esoteric sign language was another strategy for creating directly signifying forms – and one that, as Robert P. Welsh has convincingly revealed, constitutes a direct link between Symbolism and early abstraction (Welsh 1986; see also Davenport 2007). However, in Symbolist art the visual elements that manifest the interconnectedness of form and content are often quite subtle and not as clearly expressed as in Kandinsky's work or in certain Nabi paintings. Hence this issue has to a large extent remained overlooked, although the rather general notion that a Symbolist painting can reflect a mental state or a 'mood' has been widely accepted. Edvard Munch developed sophisticated strategies for establishing links between the interior and exterior realities. Shelley Wood Cordulack (2002) has explored his method of using medical illustrations of veins, nerve cells, brain tissue,

and so forth as a visual source for his landscapes that reflect the interior sentiments of their inhabitants. Munch also employed long strands of hair to signify a kind of telepathic connection between people, as has been noted by Ringbom (1989: 43), among others. Ringbom recognised a similar approach in the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela's synthesising approach which integrates the human figure with the surrounding landscape, as well as in the way he used visual tricks to create narrative content. For instance, in *The Revenge of Joukahainen* (1897, Turku Art Museum), one of a number of his paintings that illustrate mythical episodes from the epic poem *The Kalevala*, the main character's gaze is integrated with the line of the horizon in the background. It would be possible to list numerous examples of similar visual strategies that reflect the interconnectedness of form and content in Symbolist art. This is, in fact an extremely central feature of Symbolist art, and an issue that is related to the notion of visual ambiguity which will be discussed in the final section of this article.

Hence, to return to Enckell's painting, in both its form and content the image manifests the notion of different levels of existence. More specifically, the motif of closed eyes can be seen as a reflection of the fundamental Symbolist attitude, which questioned the privileging of vision and the inherent link between seeing and knowing that has been associated with Western modernity. This *ocularcentrism* is believed to have originated in ancient Greece. Plato compared the human eye to the sun and he grouped the sense of sight together with intelligence and the soul and not with the other senses. However, Martin Jay (1993: 29) has noted that in Plato's philosophy 'vision' actually seems to refer to that of the inner eye and not to physical perception. The emphasis on this alternative model of vision entered the esoteric tradition through Neoplatonism. Plato's negative attitude towards art as imitation thrice removed from the truth is well known, but the Neoplatonic tradition transformed his ideas in a way that made it possible to give art a more elevated status. According to the Platonic mode, artists were not conscious creators but divine mediators of God's message (Bays 1964: 3–4). This ecstatic theory of artistic creation became a central thread in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus. According to his theory, the human soul occupies an intermediate position between God and matter, and during the ecstatic state the soul is able

to lift itself to the supreme level. This higher realm of truth is always within us, and thus this move upward to the supreme level is also to be perceived as a move inward (Hadot 1998: 26–7). Art as an imitation of reality had no more worth for Plotinus than it had for Plato, but he perceived the possibility of another kind of art that would have the potential to access the truth, the eternal model, behind appearances. Connection with this higher realm could be achieved by turning inward and relying on the vision of the inner eye. With this metamorphosis of inner vision, it became possible to see the spiritual dimension behind appearances (Hadot 1998: 35).

The notion of an artistic ‘inner vision’ gained unforeseen importance in the aesthetic theory of Romanticism as it found support in modern scientific theories and came to be associated with the newly-conceived idea of the creative imagination. It has arguably been one of the most significant ideas to have transformed art within the past two centuries. Gwendolyn Bays has described the Romantic seer-poet as ‘one who possessed magic vision of the kind which could be found both in the wisdom of ancient Magi and in the modern discovery of Mesmer’ (Bays 1964: vii). The romantic visionary William Blake understood the imagination to be a mystical union with the absolute, and for him the world of the imagination was the only thing that truly existed. Blake’s understanding of the concept stemmed largely from the occult and esoteric tradition of Jacob Böhme, Paracelsus, and Swedenborg. The concept of the imagination, understood as uncontrollable fantasy, has often carried negative connotations, but in the occult tradition it has always been held in high esteem (Gibbons 2001: 92–102; Hanegraaff and Van den Doel 2006). For Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant), one of the key figures of modern occultism, the ‘imagination is in effect the soul’s eye; therein forms are outlined and preserved; thereby we behold the reflections of the invisible world; it is the glass of visions and the apparatus of magical life’ (McIntosh 1972: 149). In the 1840s Lévi published a long poem called ‘Les Correspondances’ that served to popularise the Swedenborgian theory of correspondences. It was also a possible source for Charles Baudelaire’s famous poem ‘Correspondances’ which was quoted and paraphrased endlessly by Symbolist artists, critics and theorists (Wilkinson 1996: 24–6, 217–20).

Baudelaire was indisputably an important mediator of this idea for the Symbolist generation, although

his impact may have been exaggerated to a certain extent. It is often difficult to pinpoint whether these notions were drawn from direct esoteric sources, or accessed through intermediaries like Baudelaire or Honoré de Balzac (Burhan 1979: 132–7). In any case, from Baudelaire the Symbolist generation could adopt the theory of correspondences in a formulation that was particularly suitable for aesthetic purposes. Imagination indicated for Baudelaire the ability to perceive the mystical correspondences between the visible and the invisible worlds, and hence it was ‘the queen of faculties’ (Baudelaire 1868; see also Hiddleston 1999: 39–41). Baudelaire believed that correspondences can be either horizontal or vertical; that is, either synaesthetic or transcendental. Synaesthesia meant, for example, that a sound could suggest a colour and vice versa. This notion found support in modern scientific theories that examined the phenomenon from a psycho-physiological perspective. Transcendental correspondences, on the other hand, existed between the visible and the invisible worlds (Wright 2005: 33). According to Baudelaire, it would be surprising if ‘sounds could not suggest colours, that colours could not give the idea of a melody, and that sounds and colours would not have the ability to translate ideas’. The world had been created by God as a complex and indivisible totality, and hence it was only logical that things could be expressed by reciprocal analogy (Baudelaire 1861: 14). In addition to Baudelaire, Balzac was an important transmitter of Swedenborgian ideas in the nineteenth century through the trilogy of novels known as *Le Livre Mystique* (1831–5). Balzac’s knowledge of Swedenborg’s theories may in fact have been somewhat limited, but his writings contributed to the literary myth of Swedenborg as first and foremost a mystic and a visionary (Wilkinson 1996: 156–84). This perception of Swedenborg is reflected also in the description of him as a ‘hallucinating genius’ by the Symbolist poet, author, and art critic Albert Aurier (1865–92). He presented Swedenborg as a somewhat questionable authority, prone to the most grotesque ramblings, but a visionary genius none the less, and a model for all artists who were seeking to express truths beyond appearances (Aurier 1893: 210).

Aurier quoted a lengthy passage from *Arcana Cœlestia* (1749–56), in which Swedenborg explains the theory of the correspondences. This idea was so vital that he claimed that it should serve as an epigraph for all aesthetic treatises and should be



meditated upon by every artist and critic. The theory holds that there are three hierarchically arranged worlds – the natural, the spiritual, and the celestial – and the correspondences are the links between these levels. Every object in the natural world reflects its spiritual image, which in turn is a representation of a divine archetype (Bentz 2002: 141, 351–62). Only the visionary genius, the ‘superior man, illuminated by the supreme virtue that the Alexandrians call “ecstasy”’, was able to perceive these links and hence come to know the symbolic significance of the objects (Aurier 1893: 213–14). By mentioning the ‘Alexandrians’, Aurier was signalling towards the Neoplatonic tradition. He then went on to quote Baudelaire’s famous poem:

He alone who has tackled the monster of illusion can walk as a master in the fantastic temple “Where the living pillars/ Sometimes let out confused words.” Whereas the rest of the human herd, remaining fooled by the appearances and denying the absolute ideas, passes blindly “Through the forests of symbols/ Which observe him with familiar glances.” (Aurier 1893: 214)<sup>6</sup>

Another critic to quote Baudelaire and the theory of correspondences in support of his aesthetic theory was the Polish author Stanisław Przybyszewski, who belonged to the bohemian cultural circle that assembled in Berlin in the mid-1890s. August Strindberg was a central figure in this group which gathered in the tavern known as ‘Zum Schwarzen Ferkel’, and after its reputation as the hub of radical artistic and literary circles had been established, several Finns and Scandinavians came there to look for inspiration when they passed through town (see Lathe 1972, Söderström 1997). The topics of discussion among this group extended from Satanism to the most recent scientific discoveries. Przybyszewski had studied medicine in the early 1890s and was well versed in the theories of modern psychology. He was keenly interested in the most recent developments in neurology and psychology, particularly in the theories about the rhythmic transmission of thought

6 ‘Où de vivants piliers/ Laisseraient parfois sortir de confuses paroles ... A travers les forêts de symboles/ Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.’ These lines are quoted directly from Baudelaire’s poem.

waves through the power of hypnotism or suggestion (Lathe 1972: 21–2). According to Przybyszewski, the highest capacity of the intuitive and visionary artist was ‘individuality’, which he defined as the facility that gives sense impressions their intensity and quality, binding them all together so that most heterogeneous things are perceived as equivalent because the individual responds to them all with the same emotion: ‘there is colour to line, perfume for tone: Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répendent’ (Przybyszewski 1894: 15).<sup>7</sup>

### The Janus-faced individual

Aurier’s ‘ecstasy’ and Przybyszewski’s ‘individuality’ both refer to the facility of a heightened vision, that is, the capacity to perceive the correspondences between the material and the spiritual worlds. As Burhan (1979) has demonstrated, the same definition of perception as a spiritual and subjective vision of the world as a symbolic representation is at the heart of esoteric theory and the Symbolist aesthetic. Przybyszewski explains that what he means by ‘individuality’ is the transcendental consciousness, the immortal part of the individual, more commonly known as the unconscious. He was familiar with the scientific formulations of this notion, but here he appears to be referring to the mystical philosophy of Carl du Prel. Przybyszewski’s ‘individuality’ is very similar to du Prel’s description of what he calls the ‘transcendental subject’, which is the part of the human mind that prevails in unconscious states such as somnambulism or clairvoyance. Unlike some other early theorists of the unconscious, du Prel held that the transcendental subject remained an individual (Weber 2007: 598).<sup>8</sup> He described the human mind as Janus-faced: one face inhabits the ordinary world of sensory experience, whilst the other, the transcendental subject, is the part of the mind that prevails in altered states of consciousness, such as hypnotism, trance, dreams, somnambulism or clairvoyance (du Prel 1885: 378–90; Weber 2007: 598).

The notion of the Janus-faced individual takes us back, after this little detour, to Enckell’s portrayal of his artist friend Bruno Aspelin. An x-ray image of

7 The last sentence is in French in the original and quoted directly from Baudelaire’s poem.

8 Edouard von Hartmann’s ‘unconscious’, for instance was an undifferentiated absolute.



Beda Stjernschantz, *Irma*, 1895-96, oil on canvas, 37.5 x 32.5 cm, Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jukka Romu.

the painting reveals that originally there was another head beside the one that now floats solitarily between the two colour fields (Sarajas-Korte 1966: 195). It has a counterpart in the art of the period in the painting known as *Irma* (1895-6, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki), by Beda Stjernschantz who at the time was a very close friend of Enckell. In this image, the viewer encounters the direct and sincere gaze of a young girl set against a background of stylised irises. An old photograph of the painting shows it in an earlier stage as a double portrait. The second figure that was removed seemed ecstatic and almost immaterial, suggesting a visual link with the nineteenth-century attempts to photograph spirits. Juha-Heikki Tihinen (2008: 86-91) has referred to the possibility of interpreting the disappeared figures in *Head* and *Irma* as images of 'doppelgangers'. The notion of an immaterial double was central in occultism and du Prel's theory offered one very popular formulation of this idea. He explained that as the psychological and sensory abilities of humans continue to develop in the

course of evolution, the part of the Janus-face that now lives in the realm of unconsciousness will gradually emerge into consciousness. Hence, education of the senses was the key to the transition towards a higher state of being. When our senses become more highly tuned, the world will appear to us in new ways. In dreams and abnormal mental states, such as trance or delirium, when the threshold of sensation is lowered, we can momentarily become aware of our future state of being (Sommer 2009: 61; Weber 2007: 558). Although he is not well known today, du Prel was an influential figure particularly in the German-speaking part of Europe. Sigmund Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* calls him 'that brilliant mystic', and among other famous readers were Rainer Maria Rilke, Vassily Kandinsky, Thomas Mann and Arnold Schönberg (Sommer 2009: 59; Weber 2007: 595). He also had avid readers in the Nordic countries, including August Strindberg and Ola Hansson, who played their part in disseminating du-Prel's ideas among their fellow northerners. Several of du Prel's writings were translated into Swedish almost immediately (a Swedish translation of *Die Philosophie der Mystik* appeared in 1890), and when the Finnish author and newspaperman Kasimir Leino published an article on occultism and spiritualism in 1894, he mentioned du Prel as one of the leading figures of this movement in Germany (Leino 1894: 14). It is not at all unlikely, then, that these Finnish artists would have had direct or indirect contact with his writings.

In their original format, Enckell's *Head* and Stjernschantz's *Irma* present the Symbolist idea of inner vision and different levels of existence in a manner that was perhaps too literary. This may explain why both artists made the same decision of removing the other figure, thus making the image more evocative. In Enckell's painting, the levels of existence now find a more abstract and suggestive expression in the black and red colour fields that divide the painting into two halves. The second figure in Stjernschantz's painting was possibly intended as a kind of spiritual self-portrait; her features bear a certain amount of resemblance to those of the artist. If we follow this line of interpretation, it was this second human figure that embodied the idea of the artist as someone who can use her capacity for interior vision in order to reveal truths beyond appearances (O'Neill 2014: 45; Stewen 2014: 103). In the final version of the painting, the ornament of ethereal flowers may be seen to reflect a similar notion, but in a manner that is more

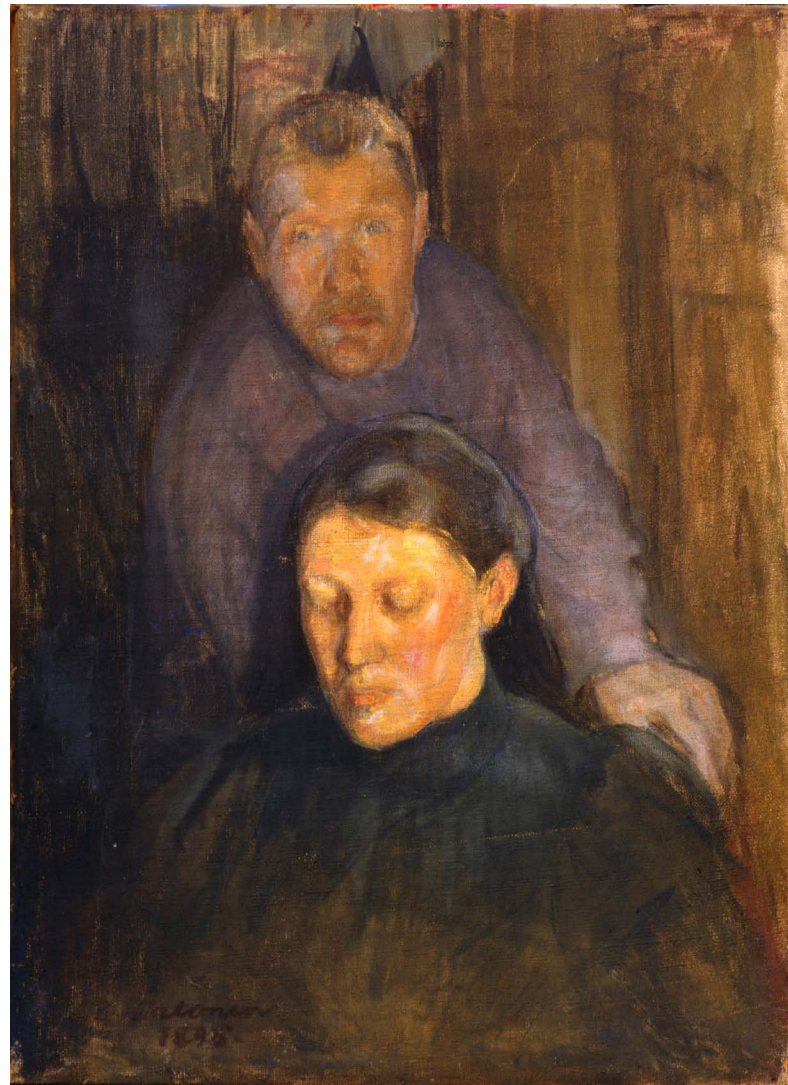


in line with the Symbolist principle of suggestiveness. They can be seen as unconscious thoughts or messages from another dimension that can only be perceived through the power of intuition (see Lahelma 2014: 146–7).

Pekka Halonen's *Double Portrait* (1895, Halosenniemi Museum, Tuusula) is another work from the period that has a similar composition to Enckell's *Head* in its original format. It would be easy to dismiss it as a simple portrayal of the artist and his wife commemorating their marriage, which took place in the same year. But the parallel with Enckell's suggestive image opens the possibility for a more profound interpretation. It should also be noted that Halonen and Enckell were friends and had even shared living quarters in Paris in 1891–2 (Sarajas-Korte 1966: 63). Both attended the Académie Julian where the esoteric spirit of the Nabis was still strong. The following winter Halonen and his artist friend Väinö Blomstedt became students in Paul Gauguin's private academy. This was a period of intensive religious and aesthetic searching for both of them. Together they studied A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) which, according to Halonen, was so profound and strange that it made his hair stand on end (Sarajas-Korte 1966: 112). Halonen became a regular at the Crémérie, hosted by Madame Charlotte and frequented by avant-garde artists and writers from all over Europe, including Gauguin himself (Gutman-Hanhivaara 2008). Gauguin had returned from his first stay in Tahiti, and the exhibition of his works in the galleries of Durand-Ruel had caused a great stir in the Parisian art world in the autumn of 1893. In the *Double Portrait*, Halonen has painted his wife's face in a manner that brings to mind Gauguin's ceramic vase in the form of a head (1889, Danish Museum of Art & Design, Copenhagen). In this extraordinary self-portrait, which Mark A. Cheetham has described as the most dramatic image of the 'return to self' in late nineteenth-century art, the viewer's attention is drawn to the unusual technique and format (Cheetham 1991: 7). It represents the artist metaphorically as a vessel that can become filled with something from outside itself (Cheetham 1991:7; Stewen 1996: 19–20; Wittlich 1995: 237). The return to self indicates here a plunge into something larger. The luminosity of the woman's face in Halonen's painting could even be seen as a visual echo of the glazed surface of the ceramic vase. The facial expression and the depiction of the closed eyes are also

very similar. The eyes actually seem veiled rather than closed and it looks as if light is glowing through the eyelids. The artist himself stands behind his wife, leaning forward but almost wary of touching her, as if in admiration of this radiant being before him. His face has a perplexed expression, reminiscent of an earlier self-portrait that he painted in Paris in 1893.

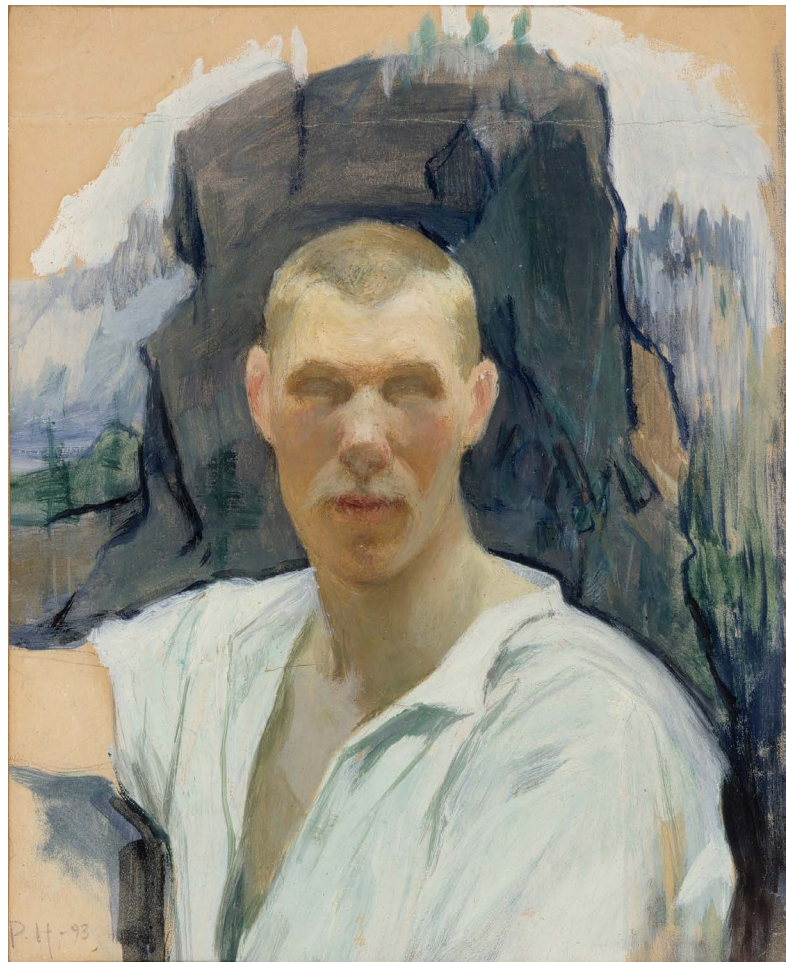
The self-portrait, which represents the artist himself with veiled eyes, can also be associated with Gauguin's self-portrait vase (see Lahelma 2014: 92–4). The eyes are painted with the same skin-tone as the rest of the face, only slightly darker. It is impossible to tell whether the artist had first painted the eyes and then covered them up with paint. If one looks at them very carefully, it almost appears that the paint is in the process of forming into irises – as if the skin



Pekka Halonen, *Double Portrait*, 1895, oil on canvas, 47 x 35 cm, Halosenniemi Museum, Pekka Halonen Society, Tuusula. Photo: Tuusula Museum / Museokuva.

was just there and then beginning to turn into eyes. If they are interpreted as embryonic eyes that are in the process of developing a new kind of vision, they could be associated with a du-Prelian notion of spiritual evolution. The unusual representation of the eyes also brings to mind Édouard Schuré's description of the disciple in the first stage of initiation, when the 'thick scales of matter which had covered the eyes of his mind' had fallen off and he had been torn away from the visible world (Schuré (1889) 1977: 320). As has been noted above, Halonen's friend and former room-mate Enckell wrote in his notebook, at around the same time, about himself as an initiate into the mysteries in a way that resembles the path of initiation given an account of by Schuré in *The Great Initiates*. Aurier also referred to the process of developing spiritual vision as 'the preliminary and necessary initiation that the true artist, the absolute artist, must undergo' (Aurier 1893: 210).

In the *Double Portrait*, painted a couple of years later, the artist's eyes have irises, but there is still something disturbing about them, something indeterminate. It is as if the paint is somehow refusing to turn itself into a representation of eyes. The muted colour scheme of violets and blues and diluted browns and greys in the background accentuates the sense of mystery. Everything is painted very thinly, the canvas showing through here and there. In the background, there seems to be some kind of a landscape of thin tree trunks against a grey sky. With its atmosphere of intimacy, mystery, and sacrality, the *Double Portrait* may be seen as an image of the sacred marriage as a union of two souls. In a letter to his fiancée, Maija Mäkinen, Halonen had written about their forthcoming marriage as a 'spiritual journey' that they are about to embark on together (Ilvas 1990: 44). In Symbolist art the esoteric conception of a spiritual marriage was often communicated through imagery that reflected the notion of androgyny as the ideal balance between the masculine and feminine principles that was propagated by Péladan (Mathews 1999: 111–14). An artist close to Péladan's circles, Jean Delville, gave this notion a rather literal expression in the painting *Love of Souls* (1900, Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels) in which the male and female souls are imagined as a young couple suspended in mid-air and wrapped inside bluish swirls that represent astral light. Their surprisingly carnal nude bodies are intertwined in a kind of celestial dance (Facos 2009: 104). Munch's woodcut *Encounter in Space* (1898–9,



Pekka Halonen, *Self-Portrait*, 1893, tempera on paper, 27 x 21 cm, Ateneum Art Museum, Finnish National Gallery. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Karjalainen.

National Museum, Oslo) presents a similar scenario in a more abstract manner. This suggestive image depicts two people, a woman and a man, in a cosmic encounter. Sperm cells float in the dark space that surrounds the couple, accentuating the idea of biological conception as a metaphor for artistic and spiritual creativity. In comparison with both Delville's meticulously literal approach and Munch's abstracted and evocative strategy, Halonen's painting seems deceptively conventional. However, as the examination above has already shown, his works are often more complex than might be immediately apparent.

Let us, therefore, continue for a brief moment along this path of investigation. The most notable account of the esoteric notion of the sacred marriage is to be found in the alchemical treatise *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*, attributed to the mythical founder of Rosicrucianism. The esoteric doctrine of 'as above, so below' is embedded in the



structure of the story, which on one level represents the sacred marriage, and on another level describes the inner journey of initiation (Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 112–14). In Schuré's account the perfect marriage is described as a 'transfiguration of love' in which man represents the creative force of the mind and woman personifies the plastic creativity of nature. The perfect union of man and woman in body, soul, and spirit, forms a miniature of the universe (Schuré (1889: 355). This idea found a somewhat grotesque expression in the bizarre sculpture by J. F. Willumsen known as *The Family Vase* (1891). It is a larger than life-size triple portrait of Willumsen, his wife Juliette, and their newborn son. Coincidentally, it now resides in the same room as Gauguin's ceramic self-portrait at the museum in Copenhagen. According to the artist's own description, *The Family Vase* was intended to be a representation of the creative energy of nature which also found its expression in art (Bodelsen 1957: 13). The creative power of the woman, according to the esoteric doctrine, is love, and when the man fertilises the feminine soul with his knowledge and will, she becomes his ideal in the form of flesh and blood. Although the masculine principle is needed to fertilise the feminine soul, the woman is just as important as man and even more divine: 'Woman, forgetting herself, lost in her love, is always sublime. In this forgetfulness she finds her celestial rebirth, her crown of life, the immortal radiation of her being' (Schuré (1889) 1977: 355–6). The loving woman, in her forgetfulness, returns in memory to the heaven of her origin. She can then serve as a spiritual guide to the man. When the woman and man compose a harmonious whole, she becomes, in a sense, his spirit double. This seems to resonate with Halonen's *Double Portrait*, which on one level presents earthly marriage and companionship and on a more profound level can be seen as an image of a spiritual union between two souls.

### Visual ambiguity and dematerialisation

The union of two souls was also a central tenet in Aurier's theory of the work of art. Aurier, who was among the first to transmit the literary theories of Symbolism into the field of visual art, was faced with an inherent problem. Symbolism valued dematerialisation, the separation of the divine soul from the earthly body, yet painting, which Aurier mostly discusses, is a form of art that has an insistent material-

ity. So he had to find a way of justifying the position of the plastic arts and defend their right to the ideal, even though they could not separate themselves too much from materiality. In order to achieve this goal, Aurier developed a rather complex theoretical setting that gave a significant role to the imaginative activity of the perceiver. He described the creation of the artwork as a union between the soul of the artist and the soul of nature. The artwork that was thus born had a soul which, like the human soul, served as a link between spirit and matter (Aurier 1893: 303). Despite its necessary materiality, the kind of art that was born this way – the only true art – was concerned with the 'ideist substratum that is everywhere in the universe and which, according to Plato, is the only true reality' (*ibid.* 301). We can see how Aurier's theory shifts the essence of the artwork from the material object towards the idea that is manifested by it. But keeping in mind that the work of art is an entirely new being, it is not sufficient to understand this as a mimetic relationship in which the artwork simply represents the idea. The power of the artwork derives from its capacity to serve as a medium through which the artist as well as the viewer can come in touch with the more fundamental level of being. The viewer responds to the artwork according to his inner capacities (according to the 'purity and profundity of his soul') (*ibid.* 303). The work of art thus becomes a locus for the imaginative activity of both the artist and the viewer. The active constructive role given to the viewer brings to mind Dario Gamboni's (2001) account of the 'potential image', as an image that depends on the viewer's state of mind to come fully into being. Gamboni challenges the unilinear formalist view of the development of modern art from impressionism through cubism to abstraction. He identifies a current of visual ambivalence and indeterminacy that runs through the history of art and becomes particularly central from the 1880s onwards with an increasing questioning of the notion of representation and the forms it takes.

For Gamboni, Symbolist art and poetry are key representatives of this tendency. He discusses the work of several artists associated with Symbolism; most importantly Gauguin and Redon. Gamboni refers to the occult and esoteric traditions here and there, but he does not give a full account of this dimension of the phenomenon that he is studying. He does, however, discuss the artistic interest in, and exploration of, the unconscious – and as Burhan (1979) and



Owen (2004) have argued, these two modern forms of knowledge are deeply interconnected. The new psychological conception of the mind based on the unconscious and the occult understanding of the self can both be seen as attempts to find a solution to the inherent paradoxes of the modern self in the way that they seek to negotiate the seemingly oppositional relationship between the known and the unknown, the rational and the irrational. And they are both interested in 'occluded' phenomena, in something that cannot be known by our everyday consciousness (Owen 2004: 114–15).

Potential images come into being in the interaction between the work of art and the viewer. They are images that are 'established – in the realm of the virtual – by the artist but dependent on the beholder for their realisation, and their property is to make the beholder aware – either painfully or enjoyably – of the active, subjective nature of seeing' (Gamboni 2002: 18). Thus, they depend on the imaginative activity of the perceiver to come fully into being. Visual ambiguity gives the artwork an open-ended and processual quality. Its meaning and even its ontological status are not predetermined, but in a constant dynamic process. In the Symbolist context, the importance of ambiguity lies most of all in the potential of creating a sense of mystery through the means of representation instead of resorting to mysterious subject matter. As has been explained above, this was only one possible visual strategy that was employed by Symbolist artists to imbue form with meaning. These issues have remained unrecognised due to the overwhelming tendency to see Symbolism in terms of subject matter rather than form – and to assume that these two can (and should) be kept apart. It has led to the notion of Symbolist art as reactionary and overly literary and somehow lagging behind Symbolist poetry. Dee Reynolds's analysis from 1995 is symptomatic. She explores the role of the imagination in nineteenth-century Symbolist poetry (Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud) and twentieth-century abstract painting (Kandinsky and Mondrian) in an attempt to reassess and relocate this concept in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century context. Reynolds argues that the practices associated with the poems of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, and the paintings of Kandinsky and Mondrian which have often been understood in terms of the self-referentiality of the artwork and the autonomy of the poetic or pictorial sign were in

fact not an end in themselves, but 'a means to new modes of signifying, in which the imagination of the receiver performs a central role' (Reynolds 1995: 2). Reynolds describes imagination as a 'process of image production that does not culminate in the formation of a final, stable, and coherent image'. An *imaginary image* (linguistic or visual) is one that by means of suggestion exceeds its powers of presentation yet at the same time negates itself in the process. The interaction between the poetic/pictorial medium and the imaginative activity of the receiver generates an 'imaginary space' where the artwork fully comes into being (Reynolds 1995: 3).

As is evidenced by her choice of material, Reynolds does not establish parallels between Symbolist poetry and Symbolist visual art. She claims that the disruption of communicative codes in Symbolist poetry, where the medium itself becomes an object of aesthetic transformation, does not become a central issue in painting until the advent of abstract art. But as I have demonstrated above, a similar tendency of transposing the focus of the artwork from the material object towards an 'imaginary space' is to be found in Aurier's aesthetic theory, and it is also evident in the artistic practices of many Symbolist artists. It appears to me, moreover, that the ability to perceive the analogues between developments in literature and the visual arts was evident already in the late nineteenth-century context.

Gamboni makes it very clear that the kind of ambiguity that he is referring to 'is not only iconographic but, more importantly, it affects representation and the distinction between figuration, ornament and abstraction' (Gamboni 2002: 10, 105–6). Incompleteness stimulates the imagination. It leaves the work of art open to an infinite number of interpretations. Moreover, this subversive tendency reflects a general shift or disruption in Western aesthetics which has resulted in a new kind of dynamic of the artwork, where its focus starts to shift from the material object towards an immaterial space of the imagination. Rodolphe Rapetti has stressed the quest for immateriality as one of the essential features of Symbolist art, which manifests itself through various aesthetic strategies: 'through the impersonal brushwork of Neo-Impressionism or the use of "prismatic" colors, or a stress on color at the expense of pictorial substance, or a Cloissonist stylisation that eschewed all illusionism, or the allusions to fresco in the work of Puvis de Chavannes and later Gauguin, or simply

subjective and imaginary coloring’ (Rapetti 2005: 103). Similarly, Reinhold Heller has observed the almost contradictory interplay of overt materiality and dematerialisation in the technically innovative art of the 1890s. In Gauguin’s fresco-like paintings, for instance, ‘the emphatic presence of the technique and material in the produced image achieves the effect of accenting the artificiality of the picture – its deviation from the visual model of natural forms rather than its adherence to an illusionistic practice’ (Heller 1985: 149). Heller connects this kind of technical experimentation directly with the occultist and philosophical ideologies which considered art to be a form of knowledge. He concludes, therefore, that although the Symbolist aesthetic is based on an idealistic view, the paintings at the same time appear to contradict this idealism in the way that they draw attention to their materiality and the process of their making. Hence, he perceives Symbolist art not in terms of ‘a disjunction between the material and the ideal’, but rather as a dialogue between these two postulates (*ibid.* 152).

### Conclusion

It has taken a long time for the art-historical field to become aware of the extensive impact of esoteric ideologies on the manifold and complex stories of modern art. The evolutionary narrative, which claims nonfigurative abstraction to be the logical and inevitable goal of the progression of modern art, has been surprisingly resilient. It is one of the reasons why art historiography has felt the need to downplay, or altogether ignore, the role of occult and esoteric ideologies in the development of modern art. It has been understood as the kind of literary influence that had to be removed in order to ‘purify’ art. However, as I suggested at the beginning of this article, things seem to be gradually changing in this respect. It is not merely a question of esoteric ideas becoming more acceptable even in mainstream art history, but also on a more general level, art-historical scholarship has become aware of the need to reassess its dominant narratives in order to create a more diverse picture of the history of modern art.

By means of this small-scale case study, focusing on a few examples of Symbolist art, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that the inward turn, which was one of the essential features of late nineteenth-century art, was facilitated by a wave of popular occultism

which broke at the same time. This transformation had a fundamental effect on the way the meaning and significance of the work of art was understood. It also had a direct bearing on the visual qualities of the artwork. Moreover, it is evident that late nineteenth-century aesthetic theorisations of these issues have had significant effects on later artistic developments. By focusing our attention on these kinds of subversive tendencies in Symbolist theory and practice, it is possible to construct an alternative ‘story of modern art’ to the prevailing one that culminates in abstraction. Abstraction certainly appears as the zenith of some tendencies that had their origins in late nineteenth-century art and culture, but it was by no means the only possible outcome of these artistic stirrings. On the contrary, the twentieth century witnessed a previously unparalleled plurality of art forms. Figuration continued to exist along with nonfigurative art and it developed into new forms, such as Surrealism and Expressionism – the roots of which also extend into late nineteenth-century Symbolism. In today’s art world, the dividing line between abstraction and figuration no longer has any real relevance. However, many of the central elements of the Symbolist aesthetic, such as inwardness, the imagination, and the notion of artistic creativity as a form of self-expression, still play an important role in contemporary artistic practice and theory. ■

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