
THE MYTHIC FEMININE IN
SYMBOLIST ART
IDEALISM AND MYSTICISM IN
FIN-DE-SIÈCLE PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the representation of the feminine in late nineteenth-century European Symbolist art. The term 'feminine' is adopted to emphasise the symbolic nature of this subject and to distinguish these images from representations of woman in an historical or allegorical context. The analysis of this symbol is situated in the context of Idealist theories which informed Symbolist aesthetics. The analysis of the image of the feminine in the art of this period reveals a three-fold aspect of the symbol: the 'negative feminine', the 'positive feminine', and the androgyne which, this paper argues, conform variously to the material and metaphysical orders of reality as defined in Idealist thinking.

The paper is introduced by a comprehensive discussion of the Idealist background of Symbolist aesthetics and focuses on the non-Realist theory of the symbol. It is argued that the image of the feminine is a symbol in the Idealist sense. The first chapter explores the symbolic and conceptual nature of the image of the mythic feminine in terms of the manner in which it is constructed visually and in terms of its general conceptual background. The second chapter focuses on the themes associated with the negative feminine, for example the theme of the *femme fatale* and the feminine as personification of nature, matter, the satanic (evil) and death. These are argued to conform to the Idealist order of the material. The third chapter discusses the mystical and spiritual attributes of the positive feminine which, it is argued, are derived from the Idealist tradition especially regarding the theory of Ideal Love and Beauty. Specific themes

are also discussed regarding this aspect of the symbol, notably the theme of silence, the interior space of the soul, the veil and the Mother Goddess. The final chapter focuses on the androgyne as the personification of the transcendental realm of the Ideal and as a symbol of unity and the synthesis of opposites, especially between matter and spirit. This chapter also deals with themes and motifs related to the symbol of the androgyne such as the theme of incest and the mirror as well as the motifs of the blue flower and the circle.

More than most art-historical writing, this dissertation situates the Symbolist image of the mythic feminine in the context of Idealist sources current during the period, especially the writings of Plato, Plotinus and Schopenhauer and the contemporary Idealist-Rosicrucian theories of Joséph Péladan. Substantial primary documentation from the period, from the literature and theoretical writings, is also drawn upon to elucidate the meaning of this allusive and enigmatic subject.

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- PREFACE -

The art of the non-Realists, or Symbolists, is a relatively neglected area of scholarly research and analysis in Art History. One possible reason for this neglect is the conceptual complexity of the art produced during this period which is, by and large, an expression of recondite esoteric and philosophical theories founded on the tradition of philosophical and mystical Idealism. Although this is cursorily acknowledged in the literature on the art of the Symbolist period, an analysis and interpretation of Symbolist imagery from an Idealist perspective, in the broadest sense, is wanting. In response to this, this paper has focused on a particular but pervasive and ubiquitous theme in Symbolist painting (and other visual *genres* of this tendency in the art of the *fin-de-siècle*), namely the image of the feminine, from an essentially Idealist theoretical perspective. The interpretation of Symbolist images dealing with the representation of the feminine, is situated in this paper in terms of the various forms of Idealism that were influential and current during the *fin-de-siècle*.

The image of woman in art is a popular issue in contemporary Art Historical debate. The question of the representation of women in Western Art and culture is undoubtedly the key issue in feminist art historical discourse. It would seem that this approach would be valuable in the exegesis of the representation of the feminine in Symbolist, or non-Realist, art. However, in doing so, one is immediately confronted with a methodological conundrum in so far as the materialist based methodological

position of feminist discourse, rooted largely in a historical materialist framework, which emphasises the dynamics of the 'objective', the collective and socio-political aspects of culture, fails to account successfully for the dynamics of the individual, subjective and affective-spiritual aspects of cultural production. Symbolist art is primarily the expression of the subjective, of the inner world of the imagination, of dream and the spiritual - of the creative unconscious. The emphasis on the inner private worlds of the individual as a starting point for aesthetic activity revealed to these artists, as it had for the Romantics and many others before them, a rich and powerful source of creativity and imagery. Indeed many artists took recourse to the images experienced in dreams, meditation or artificially induced heightened states of mind as the starting point for the creation of their works. This suggests that an interpretation and exegesis of these images should depend primarily on an approach which embraces the subjective dynamics of creativity and individual experience.

This aspect of the representation of the feminine in Symbolist art will be emphasised in this paper, i.e. that it is an expression of a complex subjective dynamic before being an expression of a socially or politically constructed representation of woman in reality. It will further be emphasised that the richness, complexity and paradoxical nature of this image in the art of the Symbolists can be accessed through tenets fundamental to the Idealist position. The range of forms in which the image of the feminine is articulated in Symbolist imagery, from the evil, destructive fatal female type, to the spiritualised transcendental type as well as the enigmatic form of the feminine as androgyne is explicable in terms of the ideas central to the Idealist tradition especially with regard to the notions of matter, soul and spirit and the relation between

these.

A problem in the literature on the subject is to remove the works in question from this essential theoretical and philosophical milieu in which they were created and to view them in isolation, decontextualised and sterilised of their numinosity. However, as much as the study of the individual frescoes, stained glass and carvings from a cathedral in the decontextualised environment of the museum or art gallery would hardly enlighten one as to the nature of their meaning as parts of a whole which function together to create the almost supernatural experience peculiar to the cathedral (for some), so the removal of the Symbolist image, and especially the image of the feminine, from the spiritual, philosophical and Idealist milieu in which they were created will reveal little of the complexity, depth, richness and 'meaning' of these images either.

An example of this problematic type of treatment of the subject of the feminine in Symbolist art is Wendy Slatkin's essay, 'Maternity and Sexuality in the 1890s'.¹ Slatkin's paper deserves to be treated at length since it highlights the problems inherent in an essentially materialist feminist approach to the subject of the feminine in Symbolist art. The discussion to follow will highlight some of the main shortcomings of this approach and thereby emphasise the relevance of the exegetic approach adopted in the present paper.

On the whole, Slatkin performs the act of decontextualising, and hence effectively sterilising, these images from the cultural, aesthetic and theoretical milieu in which, and for which, they

¹ Wendy Slatkin, 'Maternity and Sexuality in the 1890's.' *Woman's Art Journal*. Volume 2, part I, 1980, pp. 13-19.

were created. After so doing, she imposes an interpretation of these works from an anachronistic point of view based on contemporary cultural theories concerning the image and representation of women. Slatkin focuses on the image of the mother in the art and literature of the 1890's from a broad, and seemingly arbitrary, selection of Realist and non-Realist artists, with specific emphasis on the latter. Although acknowledging the symbolic or 'archetypal' aspect of many of the representations of women in the work of a broad range of artists including Puvis de Chavannes, Edmond Morin, Gauguin, Segantini, Munch, Klimpt and Modersohn-Becker as well as the novelist Emile Zola, she nonetheless asserts that the:

fascination with fertility, sexuality, and maternity occupied artists all over Europe. While these images do provide women with a type of abstract power or significance in the universe, they deny her intelligence and/or individuality. In this context, women become an apparatus for the creation of babies.²

Her argument follows a fairly generalised and exclusive analysis of the iconography and the imagery of the works in question. However, her final conclusion is not based on the visual evidence of the works she discusses. Rather, it is generalised from various feminist theoretical perspectives and including the pop-psychological notion of male 'womb-envy' - a vague notion suggesting the male sense of creative deprivation at his inability to produce life which is sublimated into artistic activity. She cites Erich Fromm's *The Forgotten Language*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Elizabeth Fischer's *Woman's Creation* to support her argument, effectively divorcing her conclusions from the discussion of the works she surveys none of which bear any obvious connection to each other apart from the broad theme of the feminine. She cites Fischer who states:

² Slatkin, *ibid.*, p. 13.

The worship of fertility in animal, plant, and human and the glorification of the phallus as seed producer: these are the religious and utilitarian vectors which influence the rise of patriarchy...

A difficult distinction should be emphasised: that between fertility and generation, the magic of creation, and fertility as production. The one was arbitrarily reassigned to man, the second was left to woman in her capacity as childbearer. This was the doctrine used to subjugate the female of the species in most known animals, ignoring psychological, aesthetic, and human civilisations. We treated ourselves as breeders treat animals, ignoring psychological, aesthetic, and human and natural principles.³

Based on this problematic and generalised analysis, Slatkin concludes:

If Fischer is correct, then the images discussed above continue the patriarchal emphasis on female fertility as production... They reduce woman to an animalistic level, denying her personality, intellect or full human faculties.⁴

Apart from the realist novel by Zola *Fécondité*, which she discusses, her conclusion is in no way supported by her analysis of the non-Realist works of art she considers. Her conclusions seem somewhat incongruent if not perplexing in view of her inclusion of the works by the woman Expressionist artist Paula Modersohn-Becker on the theme of the mother and child, a work of whom is illustrated in the article, which would seem to contradict the notion that this is an exclusively male subject reinforcing the 'male' patriarchal prejudice of woman as breeder. She, furthermore, discusses the work of realist and non-Realist artists as if their aesthetic positions and principles are identical, which is clearly mistaken, and draws the same conclusion for each. Furthermore, although acknowledging the

³ Elizabeth Fischer, *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the shaping of Society*. Garden City, New York, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979, pp. 256-257. Quoted in Slatkin, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴ Slatkin, *ibid.*, p. 18.

primacy of the 'idea' in non-Realist art as the basis for their imagery, including that of the feminine, she subsequently dismisses this important aspect of non-Realist aesthetics and its implications in the theory of the symbol during the non-Realist period. Thus, she fails to draw the vital distinction between the image of the feminine as an abstract, conceptualised symbol as opposed to the image of the feminine as a representation of woman in reality. The importance of this distinction should be stressed from the outset as it provides the key to the interpretation of the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art and will provide the starting point for the analysis of this subject in this paper. Instead she states:

As a group, these works avoid any specific historical context and make no reference to contemporary society. By stripping away contemporary elements, in their search for timeless images, these artists gave no indication of the widespread changes occurring in the position and status of women. At the turn of the century feminism was a strong, vital and evident force in France and throughout Europe. It is possible to interpret the pronounced avoidance of depictions of contemporary women as an uneasiness or outright fear of such changes in woman's status. These male artists were not depicting women who sought equality with men, but rather were seeking to define the unchanging essence of womanhood: an essence which denied women political rights or individuality while worshipping her generative powers.⁵

Rather than being sympathetic to the enormously complex Idealist basis of non-Realist art and aesthetics, Slatkin betrays her theoretical position and rather isolates the works she discusses from the philosophical, aesthetic and cultural milieu in which they were created and reduces the meaning of these works to an almost naive feminist critique. Clearly her determination to draw these decontextualised and reductionistic conclusions forces her to emphasise that these works are the product of a patriarchal

⁵ Slatkin, *ibid.*, p. 18

male mentality. Moreover, instead of coming to terms with why the image of woman is not situated in a historical context and has no reference to contemporary society as a significant element of the visual vocabulary employed in the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art, she opts for a literal social materialist interpretation of the reality of woman in society. This absence of historical context in the representation of the feminine in Symbolist art, which will be addressed in this paper, is a crucial aspect of this subject in non-Realist painting and is related to the conceptual nature of the symbol of the feminine in the art of the period.

Slatkin's paper seems to expose, in an overt fashion, many of the flaws inherent in a reductionistic, theoretically biased interpretation of non-Realist imagery especially with regard to the symbol of the feminine. The present paper will attempt to overcome this assumption that the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art is essentially and always a feminist issue. This is not to dismiss feminist methodology and its critique of art and culture, but rather to emphasise that the image of the feminine in non-Realist art (which is here understood to be distinct from the image or representation of woman), understood especially in an Idealist context, is a symbolic vehicle that personifies a powerful spiritual and psychological force. Slatkin's assertion, quoted above, that the pronounced avoidance of depictions of contemporary women in the images she chooses to discuss is a reflection of male uneasiness or outright 'fear of... changes in woman's status', would seem inappropriate in view of the assertion, which will be developed in this paper, that these works have more to do with the relation between the male or female artist and the feminine *per se* and not between the artist and woman in reality in a cultural or social context. These points capture the essential shift in emphasis which is the

approach of this dissertation. As has already been indicated, this shift was felt necessary to come to terms with the subtle and complex issues raised by the representation of the feminine in the context of the late nineteenth century, and particularly in the context of Symbolist idealist culture.

One of the immediate paradoxes of the representation of the feminine in Symbolist art is the almost simultaneous idealisation and execration of the feminine, as object of worship, and as object of fear. This issue is often alluded to in the literature, but no attempt has as yet been made to determine the connection, if any, between these two contrary poles in the representation of the feminine in Symbolist art. These poles are more often than not viewed in isolation, or one to the exclusion of the other. The theme of the feminine is discussed to any significant degree in two works dealing with the art of the Symbolist period. Jeffery Howe's iconographic analysis of the art of Fernand Khnopff, *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*,⁶ includes a chapter on the occurrence of the theme of the positive and negative manifestations of the symbol in Khnopff's art, concentrating on the form and iconography of the subject in his oeuvre. Although he alludes to neoplatonic philosophy, Howe makes no attempt to interpret the significance of the image in the context of late nineteenth-century Idealism. Howe's work is also significant in that it refers to the image of the androgyne on Khnopff's art, albeit in a cursory and generalised fashion. Bettina Polak's *Het Fin-de-Siècle in de Nederlandse Schilderkunst*⁷ also discusses the bipolarity of the image of

⁶ Jeffery W. Howe, *The Symbolist art of Fernand Khnopff*. UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor Michigan, 1982, 1979.

⁷ Bettina Polak, *Het Fin-de-Siècle in de Nederlandse Schilderkunst Die symbolistische beweging, 1890-1900*, S-Gravenhage, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1955.

the feminine in Symbolist art, with particular reference to Dutch Symbolism. Her discussion of the theme is general and descriptive rather than interpretative or analytical. The theme of the *femme fatale* in Symbolist art and literature is discussed in Barbara Bimer's dissertation, *Edvard Munch's Fatal Women: A Critical Approach*⁹, which approaches the subject from a general discursive point of view. Much of the remaining literature on the painting of the period pays lip-service to the subject of the feminine without becoming involved with the problems and complexities of the theme in the art of the *fin-de-siècle*. Reference to the theme of the *femme fatale* predominates in the literature which is largely seen as an expression of the obsession of the Decadence with morbid or perverse sexuality. Although acknowledging the culture of Decadence and its penchant for overrefined sensualism and sense of overwhelming degeneration and decay, the present research will attempt to broaden the understanding of the subject of the feminine from the perspective of *fin-de-siècle* Symbolist Idealism.

In adopting a more synthetic approach, this paper will emphasise that both the positive and negative manifestations of the representation of the feminine as well as the image of the androgyne are intrinsically related, and will suggest that they are symbolic expressions of many of the essential themes of Idealist philosophy. One of the aims of this paper is to show how these can be seen to be connected and are in fact the expression of the very polarity between Idealism and Materialism upon which the pervasive sense of duality and schism was founded during the *fin-de-siècle*. The nature and importance of this issue of duality, schism and synthesis will be stressed in the

⁹ Barbara Susan Bimer, *Edvard Munch's Fatal Women: A Critical Approach*. M. A., North Texas State University, 1985, Ann Arbor, Michigan, UMI Research Press, 1986.

Introduction. This refers to the underlying argument of this paper that the image of the feminine in non-Realist art was a symbol for the fundamental problem of the reconciliation between matter and spirit during the *fin-de-siècle*. The Introduction will outline the intellectual and social milieu of the non-Realists during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and provide, in addition, a brief overview of the history of the Symbolist movement in Europe. This section will also provide a comprehensive exegesis of Idealist philosophy with particular regard to the way Idealist principles were followed in non-Realist aesthetic discourse. Specific attention will be paid to the relationship between the notions of the Ideal and the symbol and the importance of the Doctrine of Correspondences during the period. The manner in which these ideas were adapted to artistic practice will also be discussed. Although the importance of these ideas to Symbolist aesthetics is emphasised in the literature on Symbolist painting, an actual analysis and discussion of these ideas, to the extent presented in the Introduction is absent in the literature on the visual arts of the Symbolist period.

Chapter One will focus on the nature of the representation of the feminine in Symbolist painting and will introduce this subject with a general discussion on the way the image of the feminine is constructed in Symbolist art. The nature of the 'mythic' feminine will be outlined and its occurrence during the nineteenth century will be discussed. It will be stressed that the nature of the mythic feminine as positive feminine (Ideal feminine), negative feminine (*femme fatale*) and androgyne should be understood as a symbol, in the sense discussed in the Introduction.

Chapter Two will focus on the negative manifestation of the mythic feminine as *femme fatale* and as the personification of

matter, death and evil. The chapter will document examples of this theme in the visual arts and will take recourse to examples in the literature and other art forms during the period in which the theme occurred. This chapter will also look at Idealist philosophy, especially the neo-platonic writings of Plotinus, influential during the period, and will indicate to what extent Idealist notions of matter (including eroticism, evil and death) can be seen to conform to the construction of the negative feminine during the period. This perspective challenges the prevalent approach in the literature on the subject which emphasises its morbid or perverse sexual aspects.

Chapter Three will introduce the positive or Ideal pole of the mythic feminine, a systematic analysis and interpretation of which is largely neglected in the literature. The present discussion will emphasise some of the theoretical and iconographic aspects of this symbol as well as the spiritual nature of the Ideal feminine. It will be argued that this aspect of the feminine is a construction and expression of the notions of Ideal love and Beauty derived from the Idealist and Neo-platonic tradition, articulated specifically in the writings of Schopenhauer, Plotinus and Plato, all of whom were influential during this period. The themes of silence and solitude are associated with the positive feminine which is usually constructed in quiet interiors or in landscapes at twilight. This aspect of the articulation of the positive feminine will be emphasised in this chapter. Moreover, various specific symbols and images relating to the Ideal feminine will also be discussed such as the image of the veil, the goddess Isis and the theme of the Original Mother.

Chapter Four will discuss the final aspect of the mythic feminine identified in the present research, namely the feminine as

androgynous. A discussion of the nature of the androgynous will be followed by a general discussion of the image in Symbolist painting. The emphasis for the remainder of the chapter will be on the work of Fernand Khnopff and Joseph Péladan whose paintings and writings, respectively, are chiefly concerned with the construction of the feminine as androgynous. In this regard, this paper will concentrate on Khnopff's, *Un Ange* and *Art or the Caresses* which will be interpreted in terms of Péladan's writings on the subject as well as related concepts in Idealist Philosophy including the notion of original unity and wholeness. The iconographic analysis of *Un Ange*, in terms of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of matter and spirit, is original to this paper.

On the whole, the chiefly Idealist approach adopted by this paper to interpret one of the central themes in Symbolist art, the mythic feminine, differs considerably from the approaches in the various essays and studies on the art of the period which include discussions on the image of the feminine in Symbolist art. It is hoped that by reclaiming this vital aspect of Symbolist aesthetics, the interpretation of the art of the period can be reviewed in greater depth and with greater sympathy to the complex intellectual and aesthetic issues which were part of the Symbolist ethos. It is believed further that this Idealist approach provides a key to the understanding of Symbolist art as a coherent system. Whereas before the discussion of the positive and negative poles of the representation of the feminine has been seen as a contradictory aspect of the iconography of the period, the present research would emphasise that, read from the point of view in which these works were created, i.e. philosophic and mystical Idealism, these apparent contradictions are resolved on a deeper symbolic level and that a coherent pattern emerges with regard to this important symbol in the art of the *fin-de-siècle*.

SYMBOLISM: CONTEXT, THEORY, PRACTICE

I

Context and History of Symbolism

In 1911 Wassily Kandinsky, the great exponent of the Expressionist movement, announced, in messianic fashion, the coming of a new age in which art would play a central role as an agent of spiritual renewal. This coming spiritual utopia he termed the epoch of great spirituality . It was less than twenty years earlier that similar sentiments were uttered in Symbolist circles by artists and writers who sought the renovation of spiritual values as the basis for a new cultural ethic.⁹ In 1889, Paul Adam, the Symbolist writer and critic announced the new spiritual epoch in art and articulated, moreover, some of its essential features:

L'Epoque à venir sera mystique. Mystique et théiste.
Elle inaugurerà le miracle de l'homme dédaignant la
doleur, abstait dans les rêves imaginatifs, dans
l'hallucination habituelle, rendu à l'essence

⁹ The association between Kandinsky and the Symbolists has been documented. *Vide* for example, S. Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Helsingfors, 1970; R. C. Long, *Kandinsky - The Development of an Abstract Style*, Oxford, 1980 and Cyril Lawlor Coetzee, 'Rudolf Steiner's Philosophical influence on Kandinsky's aesthetic theory', *South African Journal of Culture and Art History*, volume 2, part 3, 1988, which focuses on the work of Steiner as the bridge between Symbolist Idealism and the theosophical background to Kandinsky's abstraction.

primitive et divine, devenu aussi créateur, créateur de ses extases et ses Paradis.¹⁰

Although the general outlines of the Symbolist movement are known, the particular details of its aesthetic evades any clear-cut rational analysis. It must be stressed that it was a movement of many contradictions and paradoxes and is noted for its ambivalence and ambiguity. This will become especially evident in the discussion on the representation of the feminine in Symbolist art which is essentially expressed in the language of allusion and equivocation. These qualities were recognised by the writers and artists of the period. For instance, in 1888 Jules Christophe, the French writer and critic, attempted to define Symbolism as formulated in the circle of the cafe Gambrinus in Paris in the mid 1880's. He wrote:

It was here that Symbolism was born, out of a disgust with all that was vulgar, all that made use of outmoded naturalist formulae, Symbolism, the seeker of souls, of delicate subtleties of meaning, of emotional states, of fugitive, frequently sorrowful and significant images; an art which is therefore esoteric, unavoidably aristocratic, a bit 'fumiste', if you wish where one finds a desire for some form of mystification which takes revenge upon universal stupidity, an art which finds its roots in both science and the dream, the evocator of patterns, that is to say, of every formal concept which exists within the senses and outside objective matter, an art which is spiritual and phyrnic, nihilistic, religious and atheistic.¹¹

¹⁰ Paul Adam, *Préface to l'Art Symboliste*, Vanier, Paris, 1889, p. 11. Quoted in Guy Michaud, *La Doctrine Symboliste (Documents)*. Librairie Nizet, Paris 1947. Hereafter cited as *Documents*.

¹¹ Jules Christophe, *La Cravache parisienne*. 16 June 1888. Quoted in Mary Anne Stevens, 'Towards a Definition of Symbolism', *The Last Romantics The Romantic Tradition in British Art: Burne-Jones to Stanly Spencer*, John Christians et al., London, Lund Humphries in association with Barbican Art Galleries, 1989, p. 33.

Symbolism existed at the crossroads in a culture between decline and rebirth. Moreover, it stood Janus-like at the threshold between two great cultural impulses. In other words, it looked simultaneously backwards to the Romantic movement with which it shared a philosophical kinship and forward to the complex cultural upheaval of the Modernist period.

A comprehensive history of the Symbolist movement in art has yet to be written, yet, the details of its emergence in late nineteenth-century European culture can be traced.¹² The emergence of the Idealist impulse in painting can be traced to the early 1880's, for example, in the work of the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827 - 1901), in particular his painting, *The Isle of the Dead* (1880), a highly evocative work painted in a late Romantic style. In 1886, the Symbolist writer Jules Laforgue celebrated many of the qualities of this work which would become typical of Symbolist art generally in noting its 'consistently dream-like quality, its blinding fantasy, the impeccable ease with which it renders the supernatural'.¹³ The work of Max Klinger (1857-1920) is also noteworthy during this period especially his *Fantasies on the Finding of a Glove*, (1878-1880) as well as Félicien Rops' (1833-1898) series of prints titled *les Sataniques* (1883) which is a grand fantasy on satanic concupiscence (to be referred to further in this paper). In the domain of the expression of the dream and unconscious fantasy in art, which is characteristic of much of Symbolist imagery, the late 1870's and early 1880's is also marked by the work of Odilon

¹² Probably the most comprehensive exposition of the history and theory of the Symbolist movement in literature is Guy Michaud's *Message Poétique du Symbolisme*. Librairie Nizet, Paris, 1947, in three volumes.

¹³ Jules Laforgue, quoted in Delevoy *Symbolists and Symbolism*. New York, Rizzoli International Publications inc., New York, 1982, pp. 54-55.

Redon (1840-1916) especially the set of lithographs *Dans le Rêve* (1879) in particular 'Vision' and the series *À Edgar Poe*, for example, 'The eye like a strange balloon, travels towards Infinity' (1882).

The emergence of the Idealist impulse in art and literature during the 1880's was formularised in an article which appeared in *Le Figaro* of Saturday 18 September 1886 by the poet Jean Moréas titled *Un Manifeste Littéraire - Le Symbolisme*. The appearance of this article is conventionally seen, moreover, to mark the beginning of literary Symbolism proper and gave general currency to the word 'Symbolism'.¹⁴ With tacit reference to Hegel's philosophy, Moréas sees Symbolism as emerging from an inevitable dialectic or cyclical evolution of the arts:

Comme tous les arts, la littérature évolue: évolution cyclique avec des retours strictement déterminés et qui se compliquent des diverses modifications apportés par la marche du temps et les bouleversements des milieux... C'est que toute manifestation d'art arrive fatalement à s'appauvrir, à s'épuiser; alors, de copie en copie, d'imitation en imitation, ce qui fut plein de se sève et de fraîcheur se dessèche et se recroqueville; ce qui fut le neuf et le spontané devient le poncif et le lieu commun... Une nouvelle manifestation d'art était donc attendue, nécessaire, inévitable. Cette manifestation, couvée depuis longtemps, vient d'éclorre... Nous avons déjà proposé la denomination de *Symbolisme* comme la seule capable de désigner raisonnablement la tendance actuelle de l'esprit créature en art. Cette denomination peut être maintenue.¹⁵

Moreover, the role of the 'Idea' in non-Realist poetic expression is expressly stated in Moréas' manifesto and will be examined in closer detail below. Moréas' document is a typical manifestation

¹⁴ Vide Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1972, p. 54.

¹⁵ Jean Moréas 'Un Manifeste Littéraire - Le Symbolisme', *Le Figaro*, 18 September, 1886. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, op. cit., p. 24.

of a significant characteristic of Symbolist writers and poets to discuss and debate the features of their art in the form of the journal and periodical article. The period witnessed an unprecedented spate of *petites revues* devoted to the discussion of Symbolist issues. The principle publications were: *Le Décadent*, *La Vogue*, *l'Art Moderne*, *La Plume*, *Pan*, *La Revue blanche*, *La Revue des Deux Mondes* and *La Revue Wagnérienne*.¹⁶

In addition to the vibrant polemical discussions that took place in the *petites revues*, the artists, writers, critics and poets discussed current ideas in Symbolist thinking in regular gatherings, notably at the *café Napolitain* on Monday evenings,¹⁷ or at the home of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), at 87 rue de Rome on Tuesday evenings, *Les Mardis* as they were known. The *Mardis* were something of an institution during the period and became an important forum for artists to meet and exchange ideas on literature and the arts as well as providing an opportunity to listen to Mallarmé's discourses. These sessions were at various times attended by almost all the significant figures of the Symbolist period including Félicien Rops, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Huysmans, Munch, Gauguin, Verlaine, Stuart Merrill, Georges Rodenbach, Teodor de Wyzewa, Gustave Kahn and many others.¹⁸

The free exchange of ideas amongst non-Realist artists from almost every European country, and eventually to countries abroad, notably America, is an essential characteristic of what

¹⁶ Delevoy cites 55 of the principle periodicals serving as mouth-pieces for the Symbolist movement. *Vide Delevoy op. cit.*, p. 206. According to Butler, Remy de Gourmont, the Symbolist critic, wrote that between 1885 and 1890, at least 130 of these journals and reviews made their appearance. *Vide John Davis Butler, Jean Moréas A Critique of his poetry and Philosophy*, Mouton, Paris, 1967, p. 37.

¹⁷ *Vide Butler, ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁸ *Vide Delevoy, op. cit.*, p. 48.

could be termed the 'Idealist culture' during the *fin-de-siècle*. The Idealist impulse during this period was nurtured and matured in gatherings, particularly Mallarmé's *Mardis*, and also in the various Salons and aesthetic forums that emerged during the period for the exhibition of paintings, and sometimes the staging of non-Realist plays and poetry readings. Although such forums were established in almost every European country, they were not confined to the representation of nationalistic trends in non-Realist art. Rather, it was common for artists to exhibit their works at the various non-Realist exhibitions hosted by these forums across Europe. Khnopff, for example, exhibited at various times at all the major exhibitions in Austria, France and Belgium. Thus artists became well known across Europe and eventually abroad as well, which contributed to the development of Symbolism as an international movement.

One of the earlier groups to be constituted in this regard was the Belgium artistic forum *Les XX*, established in 1883 by Octave Maus and the poet Emile Verhaeren. The group invited a comprehensive cross-section of contemporary non-Realists to exhibit at their annual exhibitions which included the work of Fernand Khnopff, James Ensor, Rops, Whistler, Jan Toorop, Odilon Redon, Gauguin, Klinger, Giovanni Segantini, Thorn Prikker and William Degouve de Nuncques - all of whom were to become significant exponents of the Symbolist idiom.¹⁹ The final exhibition hosted by *Les XX* took place in 1893. In 1894 the *Libre Esthétique* was established which proved to be an equally popular artistic platform for contemporary trends in non-Realist thinking in Belgium during the 1890's.²⁰

¹⁹ Delevoy, *op. cit.* pp. 106-107.

²⁰ Vide Jane Block, *Les XX and Belgian Avant-Gardism, 1868-1894*. Ph.D., University of Michigan (1980), University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982, and Susan Marie

An equally successful forum for the exhibition of art in the Idealist vein in France was the *Salon de la Rose+Croix*, established by one of the leading occultists of the period and a central figure in the propagation of an Idealist aesthetic in art, Joséph Péladan (1859-1918). The *Salons* ran from 1892 to 1897 and represented almost all the major figures in non-Realist art during the period including Fernand Khnopff, Rops, Aman-Jean, Toorop, Alphonse Osbert, Jean Delville, Carlos Schwabe, Hodler, Edgar Maxence, Xavier Mellery, Armand Point, Rouault and Alexandre Séon amongst others.²¹

Various other forums for the exhibition of non-Realist art were established during the 1890's notably: the 'Munich Secession' founded by Franz von Stuck, Lovis Corinth and Segantini, which was established in November 1892²², the 'Berlin Secession', 1898 and the 'Vienna Secession', 1897. Gustav Klimpt presided as the first president of the latter.²³ The Vienna Secession was a highly organised movement with its own review to propagate its ideas, the *Vers Sacrum*. In a similar manner to other movements of its kind, the Vienna Secession sought to promote its cause through the representation of artists from all around Europe. The annual exhibitions displayed works by Khnopff, Rodin, Segantini, Klinger, Böcklin, von Stuck, Whistler, Aman-Jean, Hodler, Schwabe, Toorop, Thorn Prikker and Munch amongst others.²⁴

Canning, *A History and Critical Review of the Salons "Les Vingt" 1884-1893*. PhD., Pennsylvania State University (1980), University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1981.

²¹ As an indication of the extent of the *Salons*, Pincus-Witten estimates that the number of individual artists that exhibited at the *Salons* during the period 1892-1897 total 231. Vide Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France, Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose-Croix*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1976, p. 217.

²² Delevoy, *ibid.*, p. 103.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 165.

²⁴ Delevoy, *op. cit.* p. 168.

The period was also marked by the emergence of independent groups such as the Pont-Aven Group, including Gauguin and Emile Bernard during the 1880's, which explored the expressive and symbolic qualities of colour; and the occult group, the *Nabis*, which emerged during the early 1890's, centred on the figure of Paul Sérusier, which based its thinking on the hermetic and occult doctrines of the Kabbalah. Among the members of the latter were Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, K.-X Roussel, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard.²⁵

II

Social and Intellectual Milieu

1) Aesthetics and Anarchy: An Age of Reaction and Revolt

The complex personal and aesthetic reaction of the Symbolists against the cultural and philosophical standards of the *fin-de-siècle*, which occurred especially at the epicentre of the movement in France, can be seen as a response to the many internal and external forces which gathered momentum during the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the Symbolists responded to a need, which persisted throughout the nineteenth century, for the recognition of subjective, inner forces which motivate existence and culture. The triumph of the imagination over the 'tyranny' of reason, and the attendant revolutionary ethic of the Romantics with their celebration of the subjective self, of individualism and the resurgence of the expression of subjective states of mind, of fantasy, hallucination and the interest in the spiritual and occult worlds, never quite subsided during that period despite the increasing dominance of formalism in art and

²⁵ Vide Lucie-Smith, *op. cit.* pp.91-107.

aesthetics propagated by the Realists and the Parnassian school. The Symbolists inherited the Romantic legacy through late-Romantic artists such as Baudelaire and Wagner and the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer in whose works the inner, subjective values of existence were celebrated. The expression of the reality of the subjective in their works correlated to the particular aesthetic and intellectual temper that prevailed during the *fin-de-siècle*.²⁶

On the other hand, the period was conditioned by external events precipitated by the crushing defeat of France during the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871). Alfred Poizat wrote:

Le Symbolisme dura, parce qu'il tenait à des causes profondes, parce qu'il était la conséquence du désastre de 1870, la littérature et la poésie qui devaient germer de la défaite. Il s'est produit, en 1886, quinze ans après... Romantisme et symbolisme ont été deux réactions aristocratiques, l'une représentante d'une faction victorieuse, l'autre représentante d'un groupe vaincu.²⁷

It was a period of unrest and ferment revolving around the revolutionary events of the Commune and the confrontation of the hierarchical social order dictated by a capitalist bourgeoisie. Moreover, the mobilisation of the masses, the 'mob', an essential feature of the active Socialism that began to dominate the political arena, became a significant factor in the changing social structures of the period. This challenge to capitalist, bourgeois elitism, on the one hand, contributed to the backlash

²⁶ On the important relationship between the Romantics and the Symbolists, vide L. J. Feinberg, 'Symbolism and the Romantic Tradition', *Bulletin Allen Memorial Art Museum*, Oberlin, Ohio, United States of America, volume 43, Summer 1988; S. Braak, 'Novalis et le Symbolisme Français', *Neophilologus*. Volume 7, pp. 243-258; Guy Michaud, *Message Poétique du Symbolisme*, Nizet, Paris, 1947, volume I, pp. 20 - 36.

²⁷ Alfred Poizat, *Le Symbolisme: de Baudelaire à Claudel*, Paris, 1919, p. 136. Quoted in John Davis Butler, *Jean Moréas a Critique of his Poetry and Philosophy*, Mouton, Paris, 1967, p. 36.

by many artists and intellectuals who reinforced an 'elitist' cultural order. This was sustained through recondite and allusive aesthetic techniques and forms of artistic expression, which were fundamental to Symbolist artistic practice, as well as the resurgence of a metaphysical basis for aesthetics and artistic expression which challenged the demands of the middle-class for accessibility and realism. On the other hand, the celebration of the subjective world of the individual through a withdrawal into private worlds of the imagination, mystery and the exotic was a related reaction against Socialist collectivism promulgated by the new Socialist social order which developed during the latter part of the nineteenth century. One of the leading critics of the period, Rémy de Gourmont, situated the new approach to literature in the context of the socio-political developments during the *fin-de-siècle*:

La cause? On ne l'a encore trouvée. Elle est certainement plutôt social que littéraire. Il faut sans doute la chercher dans ce développement qui accompagna les premières années de la République. C'est la liberté politique alors immense, qui engendra le goût de la liberté littéraire... On jouissait de la liberté d'écrire, de la liberté de vivre, de toutes les libertés, et l'on ne songéait à rien qu'à dire sa pensée, même quand elle était un peu folle.²⁹

The Symbolists' reaction to the changing social order was not only expressed passively, through withdrawal, but also implied an active stance - through *anarchy*. Anarchy can be viewed as an elitist instrument wielded by the Symbolists against the current vulgarity of this age, perpetuated not only, as they saw it, through the stupidity of the masses, but also by the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the Symbolists reaction against the bourgeoisie was founded on similar grounds to that of the Berlin Dadaist's two decades later. In other words, the exploitative industrialist

²⁹ Rémy de Gourmont, *Promenades littéraires*, 5^{ème} édition, Paris, 1910, pp. 193-94. Quoted in Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

ethic, controlled by the bourgeoisie, which fed on an insatiable materialist drive for increased wealth and the accrual of capital at the expense of aesthetic or cultural values based on an ontological or spiritual necessity drove the Symbolists to revolt. Michaud observes that:

[ils disaient] 'zut'... au monde matérialiste qui l'entourait, à l'argent qui commençait à y régner en maître, au prétendu 'bon sens' de tous les parvenus des lettres et de la société. Voilà pourquoi, chez elle, la haine du bourgeois est devenu féroce. Parce que c'est le bourgeois qui fait tourner la grande machine, celle qui broie les hommes, qui écrase les chercheurs d'idéal... celle qui tue l'esprit, en réduisant le monde à un gigantesque marché de produits et de forces matérielles. Contre le bourgeois, il n'y a qu'une attitude: la révolte, la révolution.²⁹

Anarchy was a form of political and aesthetic subversion which assisted the Symbolists' aims to establish an aesthetic and cultural ethic based on spiritual values as well as the intellect. Moreover, it was a reaction against the rampant materialism (capitalism) of the age.³⁰ Anarchy was widely supported and some of the central figures of the period were associated with this trend. Mallarmé, Huysmans, de Gourmont and Paul Adam subscribed to Jean Grave's anarchist paper *La Révolte*. In response to the growing support for the tendency, one of the leading Symbolist *petites revues*, *La Plume*, devoted an entire issue to anarchy in May 1893.³¹ Paul Claudel, as a young disciple of Mallarmé, wrote that anarchy, 'provided me with an almost instinctive gesture, similar to that of a drowning man who struggles for air, of throwing bombs indiscriminately without any forethought or preselected target'.³²

²⁹ Guy Michaud, *Message Poétique du Symbolisme*, Librairie Nizet, Paris, 1947, three volumes, pp. 216-217.

³⁰ Vide Robert Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism*, Skira, Geneva, 1982, p. 77-78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³² Paul Claudel, *Mémoires improvisées*. Paris, 1954. Quoted in Mary Ann Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Indeed the Symbolist era can be seen as an age of reaction and revolt not only on the social and political sphere, but in the sphere of aesthetics and artistic activity as well. The Symbolists were united in their reaction against materialism and Positivism which pervaded contemporary aesthetic discourse in the schools of Realism and naturalism. Positivism attempted to deny any understanding of the world, and man's place in that world, not founded on the principles of the scientific method developed in the natural sciences and assumed valid in the human sciences, where the facts of reality are derived largely from sensory perception.³³ The Symbolists reacted to the Positivist assumption that ultimate reality rested on the facts of sensory and material experience, where the realm of spirit, the imagination and subjective experience were ignored. This positivist position was extended to the field of art and aesthetics. Pierre-Joseph Prudhon, the Realist critic, declared:

[Art] was not given to us to feed ourselves with myths, to intoxicate ourselves with illusions, to deceive ourselves into evil and mirages as the classicists and romantics would have it as well as all the sectarians of a vain ideal, but rather to deliver ourselves from these harmful illusions by denouncing them.³⁴

The attempt on the part of the Positivists to situate the study of art within a framework of scientific praxis, based on the relationship between cause and effect and the laws that govern this relationship, was seen as a severe limitation to the study of art in non-Realist circles. This approach was further repudiated for laying too great an emphasis on the analysis of

³³ Vide A. G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France 1885-1895*, 2nd ed., Basil and Blackwell, Oxford, 1968, p. 21.

³⁴ Pierre-Joseph Prudhon, *Concerning the Principles of Art and its Social Destiny*. Quoted in Linda Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art 1848-1900*, Prentice Hall, Inc., New Jersey, 1966, p. 51.

art in terms of the imitative quality of a work of art (and identifying this to be the main purpose of art); for viewing the material phenomenology of art as the result of historical fact only, and for failing to differentiate between artistic activity and scientific activity generally.³⁵ This scientific attitude to art was expressed in the Positivist theorist, Taine's declaration that:

Mon seul devoir est de vous expliquer les faites et de vous montrer comment ces faites se sont produits. La méthode moderne que je suivre, et qui commence à s'introduire dans toutes les sciences morales, consiste à considérer les oeuvres humaines et en particulaire les oeuvres d'art comme *des faites et des produites*, dont il fait marquer les caractères et *chercher les causes*: rien de plus.³⁶

The Symbolists reacted against this suggestion that all art is science and hence explicable according to reductive and deterministic laws. This could only lead, they believed, to spiritual and aesthetic nihilism. Ernst Hello, the Symbolist author wrote:

Le réalisme pur, ni au théâtre ni ailleurs, n'a pris un nom, ni adopté une forme. Là où il passe, il détruit l'art, mais ne se propose pas pour le remplacer. Il fait le vide. Le réalisme a donc, dans l'histoire de l'art, la place du scepticisme absolu dans l'histoire de la philosophie. Il est l'expression du désespoir...³⁷

It should be emphasised, however, that the Symbolists were not anti-materialist as such, a point not sufficiently stressed in the literature. Indeed, physical and material reality had a special function in their epistemology and aesthetics - both derived essentially from mystical and philosophical Idealism. The

³⁵ Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

³⁶ Taine, *Philosophie de l'Art*. 2nd ed., 1872, p. 20. Quoted in Lehmann, *ibid.*, p. 26. Emphasis added.

³⁷ Ernst Hello, *L'homme, la vie, la science, l'art*, p. 372. Quoted in Lehmann, *ibid.*, p. 34.

polarisation of reality into a physical, sensual and material order versus a spiritual, transcendental and metaphysical order is intrinsic to the Idealist position. The metaphysical and material realms are related in so far as the former is seen to be a reflection or mirror of the latter and to this effect, knowledge of the metaphysical order of reality can be gleaned through the material world. This, as will be discussed in greater detail below, is the essential principle upon which all of Symbolist aesthetics is based. Moreover, it will be argued in the following chapters that this duality in the orders of reality is the fundamental theoretical assumption upon which the image of the feminine can be interpreted in non-Realist art.

ii) Duality and Schism, 'Rupture...in the Soul'

A further relevant issue with regard to the intellectual milieu of the Symbolists, and pertinent to the images discussed in this dissertation, is the profound sense of psychological and spiritual schism and duality and a corresponding deeply felt desire for unity and synthesis on the cultural and individual level experienced generally during the *fin-de-siècle*. The desire for (original) unity was a fundamental impulse in Symbolist thought. Moreover, it was a central aspect of Symbolist Idealism which was modelled on the various esoteric and philosophical systems predicated on the notion of duality and synthesis, for example, the Doctrine of Correspondences and neoplatonic philosophy, both of which will be discussed in greater detail in the course of this paper. The problem of duality was expressed to a greater or lesser extent in much of the writing that was produced during the *fin-de-siècle* and also constituted a fundamental element in the iconography of the art produced during the period. As this paper will argue, the bipolarisation of the image of the feminine as well as the image of the androgyne in

Symbolist art are directly related to the problems of duality and schism on the one hand, and the corresponding desire for synthesis and original unity on the other.

The sense of schism and duality during the *fin-de-siècle* was exacerbated by the bigotry of materialism and rationalism, prevalent during the period, which was regarded as one of the principle factors which lay behind the sense of dis-ease and loss of the recognition of the value of the spiritual as a fundamental aspect of the human condition. The positivistic reduction of human experience to the physical and sensual in scientific praxis silenced the reality of affectivity and the potentially infinite realm of the imagination and the spiritual as legitimate factors of existence. Moreover, the failure of organised religion, becoming increasingly secularised, to provide a supportive basis for the development of spiritual knowledge contributed to the sense of ontological deficiency, (as much as positivistic science had), in cultural discourse during the period.

This problem of schism and the desire for unity was cogently articulated in Edouard Schuré's *Les Grandes Initiés* (1889) which generated a significant following during the period in so far as it expressed, in the language of esoteric science, many of these essential issues with which the Symbolists were concerned. Schuré saw the *fin-de-siècle* as an age marked by the hostile opposition between Science and Religion, 'the greatest evil of our times is the fact that Science and Religion appear as two hostile forces that cannot be reconciled with each other'.³⁹ Moreover, Schuré sees a fundamental schism arising from the failure of Science, bound in its agnostic materialism, and Religion, bound by its

³⁹ Schuré, *The Great Initiates, Sketch of the Secret History of Religions*, Translated by Fred Rothwell in two volumes, Rider and Company, London, n.d. Volume I, p. ix.

inflexible dogma, to fill a basic need which requires both the rational and spiritual:

a profound rupture has been brought about in the soul of society as well as in that of the individual... Hence arises profound opposition, a secret war, not merely between the Church and State, but in Science herself, in the heart of the Churches, and even in the consciousness of all thinking individuals. For whoever we are, to whatsoever philosophic, aesthetic, or social school we belong, we bear within ourselves these two hostile worlds that are apparently irreconcilable and spring from two indestructible needs of mankind; the scientific and the religious.³⁹

The result of this is a state of decline and loathing where agnosticism and scepticism become the rule of intellectual discourse.⁴⁰ This moral decadence extends to the aesthetic realm as well:

Under such auspices, literature and art have lost all understanding of the divine. No longer accustomed to eternal vistas, most of our modern youth have dabbled in what their new masters call naturalism, thus degrading the fair name of Nature. For what they dignify by this title is nothing more than an apology for base instincts, the slime and filth of vice, or else a complaisant portrayal of our social platitudes; in a word, the systematic negation of both soul and intelligence.⁴¹

Schuré asserts that this lost epistemological and ontological unity can be regained through the re-establishment of the principles of esoteric science, 'the secret doctrine, the occult actions of the great initiates... which may be called the esoteric tradition or the doctrine of the mysteries... Here we come to the generating point of Religion and Philosophy which meet in integral science at the other end of the ellipse. This point corresponds to transcendental truths'.⁴² Moreover, the antiquity, continuity and essential unity which comprises this

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. x and xi.

⁴⁰ Schuré, *ibid.*, p. xi.

⁴¹ Schuré, *ibid.* p. xii.

⁴² Schuré, *ibid.*, pp. xvi-xvii.

eternal, or perennial, philosophy, according to Schuré, 'constitutes the primordial link between science and religion, and the final unity of the two'.⁴³ Furthermore, Schuré clearly indicated the particular relationship between the two orders of reality, between the spiritual and material, 'Spirit is the only reality. *Matter is nothing but its lower, changing, ephemeral expression, its dynamism in space and time*'.⁴⁴ This view of the nature of matter is fundamental to the Idealist and esoteric tradition and has special relevance with regard to the approach to the negative feminine in this paper.

The esoteric dimension of Spirit, as defined by Schuré, can be interpreted as the world of the Ideal and the eternal Ideas. Schuré concludes the Preface with a declamatory appeal for the commitment to the world of the Ideal:

As for us... who believe that the Ideal is the only Reality, the only Truth, in the midst of a changing and fleeting world... there is only one thing we must resolve to do: affirm this Truth as loudly as and fearlessly as possible, throw ourselves along with it and for its sake into the arena of action, and, rising above the confusion of the fray, endeavour by meditation and individual initiation, to enter into the Temple of immutable Ideas, there to arm ourselves with principles that nothing can shatter.⁴⁵

The issues raised in this section will provide an essential backdrop to the present discussion of the representation of the feminine which is seen as a fundamental expression of the problem of the duality between matter (the negative feminine) and spirit (the positive feminine) and the synthesis between these (the androgyne).

⁴³ Schuré, *ibid.*, p. xx-xxi.

⁴⁴ Schuré, *ibid.*, p. xxii. Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Schuré, *ibid.*, p. xxxv-xxxvi.

iii) *Idealism and Mysticism: le 'Jardin des Idées'*

The notion of the Ideal world, containing the eternal and immutable Ideas, the essential transcendental forces behind creation, pervaded not only the intellectual and artistic milieu of the Symbolists, but also formed part of the general revival during the end of the nineteenth century of interest in the spiritual and the occult. This spiritual impulse constituted a deeply rooted urge endemic in the period. A sign of this need was the public response to the opening of the first Salon de la Rose+Croix under the auspices of Joseph Péladan, one of the first public gestures in the Idealist and occult vein which attracted enormous public interest. Pincus-Witten records that:

An enormous and curious crowd came. More than 22,600 visiting cards were left. The afflux was so great - Lamardie counted 274 carriages - that the police were forced to stop traffic between the Opéra and the rue Montmartre until past five in the afternoon.⁴⁶

This Ideal world was seen as the realm of original wholeness and the source for the reconcillation of duality, in other words, as the expression of Paradise lost or the Golden Age of spiritual unity and perfection (also encountered in the philosophy of the Romantics). André Gide wrote:

Le Paradis n'était pas grand; parfaite, chaque forme ne s'y épanouissait qu'une fois; un jardin les contenait toutes... Chaste Eden! Jardin des Idées! où les formes, rythmiques, et sûres, révélaient sans effort leur nombre; où prouver était inutile... Triste race te disperseras sur cette terre de crépuscule et de prières! le souvenir du Paradis perdu viendra désoler tes extases, du Paradis que tu rechercheras partout - dont viendront te reparler des prophètes - et des poètes, que voici, qui recueilleront pieusement

⁴⁶ Pincus -Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France, Joséph Péladan and the Salons de la Rose+Croix*. Garland Publishing, Inc. New York, 1976, p. 104.

les feuillets déchirés du Livre immémorial où se lisait la vérité qu'il faut connaître.⁴⁷

As will be discussed in the following section, this Idealist impulse during the late nineteenth century was the foundation for the overall subjectivist tendency which powered non-Realist thinking, of which mysticism, 'spiritualism', esotericism and occultism were further integral parts. The term Idealism was surrounded by much confusion during the period and was generally understood to refer to an expression for a *feeling* of the unknown and a hidden world of the occult and mystery, the *Au-Delà*.⁴⁸

The Idealist impulse during the *fin-de-siècle* can be divided into two streams, namely philosophical Idealism and mystical Idealism. Philosophical Idealism denotes the revival of interest in the philosophy of Plato, Plotinus, Hegel and Schopenhauer⁴⁹ whose

⁴⁷ André Gide, *Le Traité du Narcisse*, 1891, pp. 13-14, 17. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁸ Michaud, *Message*, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-234.

⁴⁹ For a discussion on the influence of Schopenhauer, *vide* L. J. Feinberg, 'Symbolism and the Romantic Tradition', *Bulletin Allen Memorial Art Museum*, Oberlin, Ohio, volume 43, pp. 9-11; Howe, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 *et seq.*; Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900*, Translated by Derek Coltman, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 46 *et seq.*; P. T. Mathews, *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1986, p. 42 *et seq.*; H. R. Rookmaaker, *Synthetist Art Theories. Genesis and Nature of the Ideas on Art of Gauguin on his Circle*, Swets and Zelinger, Amsterdam, 1959, pp. 36 *et seq.*; and Lehmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 39 *et seq.*

For a discussion of the influence of Plotinus on the non-Realists *vide* Howe, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 *et seq.*; Rookmaaker, *op. cit.*, pp. 27 *et seq.*; Mark A. Cheetham, 'Mystical Memories: Gauguin's Neoplatonism and "Abstraction" in Late-Nineteenth Century French Painting', *Art Journal*, volume, 46, no. 1, Spring 1987, pp. 15-21, and Mathews, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-36.

For a discussion of the influence of Hegel in especially the writings of the Symbolist author, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *vide* Michaud, *Message*, *op. cit.*, p. 86 *et seq.* The influence of Hegel in the writings of Mallarmé has also been indicated. *Vide* P. Martino, *Parnasse et Symbolisme 1850-1900*, Librairie Armand

writings were predicated on the notion of the Idea as the essential primordial form from which our knowledge of reality and existence is derived. The notion of the *Idea*, as will be discussed below, is an important concept in Symbolist art and formed an essential part of non-Realist aesthetics, especially with regard to the theory of the symbol in poetry and painting. Philosophical Idealism provided, moreover, a legitimate theoretical basis for an aesthetic based on the individual's *subjectivity* and subjective experience in holding that all knowledge is derived from the mind. The dictum 'the world is my representation', derived from Shopenhauer's philosophy, became one of the slogans of Symbolist culture and encapsulated this primacy of the individual as the starting point for epistemological activity. A detailed discussion of various aspects of the philosophy of Shopenhauer, Plotinus and Plato, will be included in Chapters Two, Three and Four in relation to specific issues regarding the mythic feminine.

Mystical Idealism, on the other hand, constituted a general feeling for the transcendental and the esoteric possibilities of existence and art. It can be seen as the expression of the general yearning for the mysterious and occult world behind material reality. This impulse was nurtured on the writings of the Swedish Mystic, Emmanuel Swedenborg, the writings of Jacob Boehme, the German Romantics, especially Schelling, the hermetic mystical systems such as the Kabbala and alchemy and contemporary writings on the occult especially those of Edouard Schuré, Eliphas Lévi and Joseph Péladan. This impulse implied a turning inwards and the exploration of inner states of feeling and the affective life (distinct from emotion) experienced through introspection and the activation of the centres of spirit and the

imagination in the creative unconscious. Emile Verhaeren wrote, 'It means withdrawing to the innermost recesses of existence, to the dark fantastic place where dreams and visions have their dwelling'.⁵⁰ It implied, moreover, a communion with the inner life borne from a greater awareness of the sense of mystery behind sensible reality. It implied an awakening to the life of the 'soul'. The cultivation of the life of the soul became an important pursuit in Symbolist culture and art. The notion of the soul constituted an important component in Symbolist aesthetic discourse as well. A detailed discussion of this aspect of Symbolist Idealism will be presented in Chapter Three concerning the Ideal feminine where it will be suggested that this 'soul-mysticism' is closely associated with certain aspects of the Ideal feminine which is, at times, constructed as a metaphor for the soul itself - as a personification of the inner life of mystery and the mystical.

The remainder of the present chapter will concentrate on a specific aspect of Symbolist aesthetics based on the Idealist tradition concerning the Doctrine of Correspondences and the theory of the Symbol. This constitutes the foundation of Symbolist aesthetics and is fundamental to the interpretation of Symbolist art generally and the image of the feminine in Symbolist art in particular. This is also meant to provide a broad theoretical basis upon which will depend the detailed discussions of various aspects of Idealist aesthetics, which will be discussed in the following chapters relevant to the construction of the image of the feminine in Symbolist art.

⁵⁰ Verhaeren, quoted in Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism*, Penguin, London, 1979, p. 205.

III

Symbolist Theory: Correspondences and the Symbol

Symbolist aesthetics is founded on the Idealist view, already discussed, that behind the world of sensual and material reality lies a hidden reality of mystery. It is this invisible world perceived through the intuitive activity of the mind, rather than through the senses, that is the object of poetic and artistic activity. Mallarmé, the central author of Symbolist doctrine, wrote: 'Il doit y avoir quelque chose d'occulte au fond de tous, je crois décidément à quelque chose d'abscons, signifiant fermé et caché, qui habite le commun...'⁵¹

This focus on the inner realm as the subject of creative expression implied that Symbolist artistic practice was directed towards making the invisible visible and giving expression to the inexpressible (the ineffable). This suggested a new attitude towards the use of poetic language, both in literature and art. Mallarmé formulated a classic definition for Symbolist art which would direct the future of the new aesthetic:

La poésie est l'expression par le langage humain ramené à son rythme essentiel, du sens mystérieux des aspects de l'existence: elle doue ainsi d'authenticité notre séjour et constitue la seule tâche spirituelle.⁵²

Mallarmé's formula stresses the Idealist notion, already discussed, that art should be directed towards the expression of the sense of mystery and the mysterious hidden behind sensual reality. Furthermore, it emphasises that after having discovered

⁵¹ Mallarmé, 'Le Mystère dans les Lettres' *Divagations* Fasquelle ed., 1896, p. 286. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵² Mallarmé, 'Definition de la Poésie', *La Vogue*, 18 April 1886. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *ibid.*, p. 15.

the essential rhythms of creation the task of the artist is to find the language to give expression to them. In so doing, the artist will find a justification for his existence on earth that will confer upon him a quasi-religious role.⁵³ The particular visual language developed in Symbolist art to achieve this will be examined in the section to follow and is an important factor in the analysis of the feminine in Symbolist art.

It has already been indicated that this hidden world behind sensual appearances was understood to be the *world of Ideas* in the Platonic and neo-platonic sense. In this regard, the Symbolist aesthetic was founded on the proposition that art should be the expression of the transcendental Idea. Moréas formulated this position in his seminal Manifesto of 1886:

Ennemis de l'enseignement, la déclamation, la fausse sensibilité, la description objective, la poésie symbolique cherche à vêtir l'Idée d'une forme sensible qui néanmoins, ne serait pas son but à elle-même, mais qui, tout en servant à exprimer l'Idée, demeurerait sujette. L'Idée, à son tour, ne doit point se laisser voir privée des somptueuses simarres des analogies extérieures; car la caractère essentiel de l'art symbolique à ne jamais aller jusqu'à la concentration de l'Idée en soi. Ainsi dans cette art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes; ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec les Idées primordiales.⁵⁴

In a similar vein Albert Aurier, the foremost theorist and critic of the Symbolist movement in painting, grounded his Idealist aesthetic firmly in this Platonic tradition:

⁵³ Vide Michaud, *loc. cit.* This return to essences as the basis for poetic and artistic expression can be seen to be the beginning of a fundamental creative impulse which culminated in Primitivism and abstraction during the early part of the twentieth century.

⁵⁴ Jean Moréas, 'Une Manifeste Littéraire'. 1886, *op. cit.* Quoted in Michaud, *ibid.*, p. 25.

art by definition (as we know it intuitively) [is] the representative materialisation of what is the highest and most truly divine in the world, of what is, in the last analysis, the only thing existent - the Idea. Therefore, those who do not know about the Idea, nor able to see it, nor believe in it, merit our compassion, just as those poor stupid prisoners of the allegorical cavern of Plato did for free men... The normal and final end of painting, as well as of the other arts, can never be the direct representation of objects. Its aim is to express Ideas, by translating them into a special language.⁵⁵

Joseph Péladan's aesthetic programme, directed through the *Salon de la Rose+Croix*, was founded on the same Idealist principle, as he expressed it, 'pour restaurer en toute splendeur le culte de l'Idéal avec la Tradition pour base et la Beauté pour moyens'.⁵⁶ In his aesthetic agenda, Péladan conceived a mystical identity in the revelation of the Idea through art:

Quand ces filles du Verbe, les Augustes Idées descendent des hauteurs pour s'incarner ici, alors un hosanna indicible s'élève, et le monde céleste entier est prosterné.

C'est l'Idéal, soleil d'Éternité qui échauffe et féconde de joie et de beauté, les saints et les artistes.

Celui qui a reçu le baiser de l'idée repousse la joie vaine des humaines; il est le fiancé de l'au-delà vermeil, il est le chevalier d'une pure pensée.

Artiste qui n'as pas appelé sur ton oeuvre le rayon du divin, écoute: je révèle ici la récompense promise aux faux de l'Idéal. Sais-tu que l'art descend du ciel comme la vie nous coule du soleil? qu'il n'est pas de chef-d'oeuvre qui ne soit le reflet d'une idée éternelle? Que ce qu'on nomme abstrait, peintre ou

⁵⁵ G.-Albert Aurier, 'Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin', *Mecure de France*, Paris 1891, pp. 156-164. Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art, A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles, 1968, pp. 89, 90. Vide also Gide, 'Car l'oeuvre d'art est un cristal - paradis partiel où l'Idée refléurit en sa pureté supérieure'. *Traité du Narcisse*, 1891, p. 25. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁵⁶ Joseph Péladan, 'Règle du Salon de la Rose+Croix', *Salon de la Rose+Croix Règle et Monitoire*, Paris, Dentu, 1891. Printed in Joséph Péladan, *La Décadaence Latine Éthopée, Le Panthée*, Volume X, Paris Dentu, 1892, p. 291.

poète? le sais-tu? C'est un peu de Dieu même, dedans
une oeuvre.⁵⁷

It is the task of the artist to penetrate the world of appearances and express the essential and the archetypal background of reality, the primal forms of creation. Gide wrote, 'Le Poète... recherche l'archétype des choses et les lois de leur succession... [il] descend profondément au coeur des choses... il a perçu, visionnaire, L'Idée'.⁵⁸ To return to the divine Idea, to the unity of Spirit and to the conception of the unity of creation constitutes the mystical activity of the Symbolist. Paul Adam, the Symbolist critic wrote, 'Il se combinera par l'ampleur de sa science et la vigueur de sa pensée à l'harmonie des mondes. Il synthétisera les séries des phénomènes dans l'Idée-Une, dans l'Idée-Mère, dans l'Oeuf générateur des Mondes, dans l'Idée divine, dans Dieu. Il sera mystique'.⁵⁹

There is more to Symbolist Idealism, however, than a mere belief in the doctrine of primordial Ideas *per se*. They held to the notion that a special relationship exists between the world of Ideas and the material world, in other words, that there is an analogic connection between these two dimensions. This implies that the Ideal world is reflected in the material world which implies that knowledge of the Spiritual world, of Ideas or essences, can be derived through the contemplation of the material world in a special way - through *intuition*. This constituted one of the central doctrines of the period that

⁵⁷ Joseph Péladan, 'A tous ceux des Beaux-Arts', *Salon de la Rose+Croix Règle et Monitiore*, *ibid.*, pp. 285-286.

⁵⁸ André Gide, *Le Traité de Narcisse*, 1891, p. 25. Quoted in Michaud, *ibid.*, p. 30-31.

⁵⁹ Paul Adam, Preface to *l'Art Symboliste*, 1889, pp. 9-11. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *op. cit.*, p. 35-36.

powered Symbolist aesthetics and epistemology, namely the Doctrine of Correspondences.

Briefly stated, this constitutes a belief in universal analogies, between physical forms and spiritual forms and between man and the Universe where knowledge of the one is derived through an understanding of the other. As Paul Claudel stated, 'nous sommes un certain commencement de la créature, que nous voyons toutes choses en énigme, et comme dans un miroir... que le monde est un livre écrit au dedans et dehors... et que les choses visibles sont faites pour nous amener à la connaissance des choses invisibles'.⁶⁰ The theory of Correspondences is an ancient doctrine fundamental to the esoteric and spiritual tradition as well as to neoplatonic philosophy. During the Symbolist period the theory of Correspondences was derived from these sources and in particular the esoteric writings of the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg and the neoplatonic writings of Plotinus as well as the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Aurier makes recourse to Swedenborg in expounding the importance of this philosophy:

Swedenborg...écrit ces phrases profondément divinatrices, que je souhaiterais voir en épigraphe de tous les traités d'esthétique et méditées par tous les artistes et par tous les critiques:

'Il en est peu qui connaissent ce que c'est que les Représentations, et ce que c'est que les *Correspondances*, et nul ne peut savoir ce que c'est, à moins qu'il ne sache qu'il y a un monde spirituel, et que ce monde est distinct du monde naturel; car entre les Spirituels et les Naturels, il y a des Correspondances, et les choses qui existent par les Spirituels dans les Naturels sont des Représentations; il est dit Correspondance parce que les Spirituels et les Naturels correspondent, et Représentations parce que ces choses représentent... Il m'a été donné de savoir, par de nombreuses expériences, que dans le Monde Naturel et dans ses trois règnes il n'y a pas le plus petit objet qui ne représente quelque chose dans

⁶⁰ Paul Claudel, *La Catastrophe d'Igitur*, n.d., pp. 205-207. Quoted in Michaud, *op. cit.*, I, p. 42.

le monde spirituel, ou qui n'ait là quelque chose à quoi il corresponde.⁵¹

Baudelaire was to refer freely to Swedenborg in his discourses on Correspondences, or universal analogies.⁵² It was Baudelaire's support of the theory of Correspondences which first gave this system of thought validity as a theoretical basis for a metaphysical aesthetic. Apart from his frequent references to the subject in his writings, it was probably his poem, from *les Fleurs du Mal*, titled *Correspondances* which attracted universal support amongst Symbolist writers and artists to the doctrine. The poem as follows is quoted in full:

Past nature's vibrant pillard temple where
Mysterious words at times may sound, man strays
through forests of symbols; as he wanders there
They watch him with his old familiar gaze.

As long-drawn echoes merge so far beyond,
In unity profound and faint, as night
Unbounded, vast, immeasurable as light -
So perfumes, sounds and colours all respond.

Some perfumes are sweet as infant's flesh
Soft as Oboes, green as meadows lit,
And others, rank, in triumph rise afresh

To flaunt the increase of things infinite
Like musk and amber, benjamin and incense
that sing hosannas to the soul and sense.

⁵¹ A. Aurier, 'Le Symbolisme en Peinture', *Mecure de France*, March 1891. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵² In his essay on Victor Hugo (1861) Baudelaire writes, 'Swedenborg, qui possédait une âme bien plus grande, nous avait déjà enseigné que *le ciel est un très grand homme*; que tout, forme, mouvement, nombre, couleur, parfum, dans le *spirituel* comme dans le *naturel*, est significatif, réciproque, converse, *correspondant*... nous arrivons à cette vérité que tout est hiéroglyphique'. Charles Baudelaire, *Sur mes contemporains: Victor Hugo*. (1861) *Oeuvres complètes*, volume II, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p. 133 (hereafter *OC*). *Vide* also Baudelaire's essay *Richard Wagner et 'Tannhäuser' à Paris*, *OC*, volume II, *ibid.*, p. 784.

These lines contain implicitly - and in poetic form - the elements of the doctrine of Correspondences which can be summarised in the following points:⁵³ Firstly, it implies the unity of creation. As Baudelaire expressed elsewhere, 'les choses s'étant toujours exprimées par une analogie réciproque, depuis le jour où Dieu proféré le monde comme une complexe et indivisible totalité'.⁵⁴ Secondly, it suggests the materiality and spirituality of creatures. This formed the basis of an essentially dualist position essential to Symbolist aesthetics and reflects the principal notion in both the Idealist and esoteric traditions concerning the duality of man as a material and spiritual being. This concept invaded, both tacitly and overtly, the iconography of Symbolist art and literature, especially, as shall be argued in this paper, in the representation of the feminine. The latter in itself can be seen, moreover, as a *correspondence*, i.e. a representation of a spiritual dynamic. Thirdly, the poem suggests the idea that there exists a correspondence between the diverse orders of sensation, or *synaesthesia*, another important idea in Symbolist art. Finally, the poem suggests the notion that a correspondence exists between the material and spiritual world by means of symbols.

The final point, regarding the notion of the symbol, is the key to the understanding of Symbolist aesthetic praxis. The analogic connection between the physical and metaphysical world asserted by the Doctrine of Correspondences implies that the metaphysical or Transcendental (Ideal) world can be expressed through material means (in addition to it *being* expressed through natural objects) in so far as material or natural objects mediate between the two

⁵³ Following Michaud, *Documents, op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Baudelaire, *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris, OC, op. cit.*, p. 784.

orders of reality. The object or form through which the metaphysical is mediated was understood to be a *symbol*.

The theory of the symbol forms a major part of the aesthetic debate in non-Realist circles. The essential concept of the symbol was already forged by Mallarmé in the middle of the 1880s and became a favoured theme of discussion at his *Mardis*.⁵⁵ René Ghil revealed that Mallarmé, 'parlant, comme un prêtre suprêmement initié, du Symbol'.⁵⁶ Ghil was to reveal some of the fundamental ideas associated with the theory of the symbol and its role in artistic activity in a series of articles which appeared in the Belgian journal, *Basoch* from June to October 1885 which were largely derived from ideas emerging from the discussions hosted by Mallarmé.⁵⁷

The non-Realist construction of the symbol was modelled largely on the neoplatonic theory that natural forms reflect the supersensible or spiritual order of reality and are therefore endowed with the potential to convey knowledge of the metaphysical. In this regard, the definition of the symbol was often seen to contrast to the allegory. Allegory was understood to be the metaphoric expression of an intellectual or rational construct and served a didactic purpose, expressing a moral or abstract principle. Saint Antoine wrote, 'l'Allegorie est toujours didactique... elle n'est point spontanée, mais réfléchi, voulu, fille du raisonnement et non d'inspiration,

⁵⁵ Vide Michaud, *Message*, *op. cit.*, pp. 326 et seq. for a discussion of the emergence of the notion of the symbol in Symbolist circles especially with reference to Mallarmé.

⁵⁶ René Ghil, *Les Dates et les Oeuvres*, p. 21. Quoted in Michaud, *Message*, *ibid.*, p. 327.

⁵⁷ Michaud, *ibid.*

s'adressant à la pensée plus qu'au sentiment'.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the symbol, like myth, emerges spontaneously from an intuitive or spiritual background, 'il naît en quelque sorte spontanément sous l'influence de l'esprit religieux'.⁶⁹ Furthermore, both allegory and symbol, in non-Realist aesthetics, are seen to be based on the notion of analogy. Yet allegory is seen to be an analogous connection between form and idea which is understood through conventional association. In other words, meaning in allegory is contained within well defined semantic limits. Alfred Mockel wrote:

L'allégorie serait la représentation explicite ou analytique, par un image, d'une idée abstraite préconçue; elle serait aussi la représentation convenue, - et par cela même explicite - de cette idée, comme on le voit dans les attributs des héros, des dieux, des déesses lesquels sont en quelque manière les étiquettes de cette convention.⁷⁰

The symbol, on the other hand, is largely indeterminate with regard to meaning and is therefore polyvalent and semantically open ended. Moreover, it requires an intuitive (as opposed to intellectual) reconstruction of meaning 'hidden' behind natural objects: 'le symbole suppose la recherche intuitive des divers éléments idéaux épars dans les Formes'.⁷¹ To this effect, the symbol is never direct and explicit but rather it is allusive and suggestive. Emile Verhaeren, the Belgian poet wrote: 'le symbole s'épure donc toujours à travers une évocation, en idée il est un sublimé de perceptions et de sensations; il n'est point démonstratif, mais suggestif, il ruine toute contingence, tout

⁶⁸ Siant Antoine, *Qu'est-ce que le Symbolisme*, 1894. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁶⁹ Antione, *loc. cit.*

⁷⁰ Alfred Mockel, *Propos de Littérature*, 1894. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *ibid.*, p. 52. Emphasis in original.

⁷¹ Mockel, *ibid.*

fait, tout détail'.⁷² Inevitably, the meaning of the symbol cannot be ultimately exhausted but remains in potential, or veiled, to be revealed after a gradual unfolding through an intuitive penetration of its essence. Henri de Régner wrote, 'Le symbole... comporte une certaine obscurité en lui, non pas d'une façon apparente, mais une manière secrète, de même que l'arbre porte en sa graine le fruit qui en naître'.⁷³

The symbol is in fact an analogic expression of the Idea itself. According to de Régner, 'Le Symbole... est la plus parfaite et plus complète figuration de l'Idée. C'est cette figuration expressive de l'Idée par le Symbole que les Poètes d'aujourd'hui tentèrent et réussirent plus d'une fois'.⁷⁴ To this effect, the symbol is seen to mediate between the Ideal and the material worlds. It serves, moreover, as a catalyst, or means of transition between the two dimensions and conducts the subject from the one to the other - from the material to the Idea. This is achieved through a knowledge of the language of symbols which is seen, furthermore, to be the special prerogative of the artist. Goerges Vanor wrote:

la créature apparaît comme le livre de Dieu, devant lequel l'homme placé ne connaît pas les mots: mais le poète doué de la science de cette langue, en déchiffrera et en expliquera les hiéroglyphes; ce qui est dehors de lui le conduisant à la connaissance de ce qui est en lui, et ce qui est en lui conduisant à la connaissance de ce qui est au-dessus de lui, après avoir pénétré les symboles du monde intelligible dans le monde de la matière, il devinera les symboles du monde surnaturel par le monde intelligible, et, un

⁷² Emile Verhaeren, *Le Symbolisme*, 1887. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷³ Henri de Régner, *Poètes d'aujourd'hui*. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

jour, dira aux hommes le mot de Dieu et le secret de la vie.⁷⁵

The non-Realist's theory of the symbol, predicated on the notion of universal analogies or correspondences, implies that all objects found in nature serve as symbols through which the divine is revealed. Jean Thorel wrote:

Si tous les phénomènes de la vie physique et de la vie moral ne sont que les manifestations différentes d'un principe unique, chacun de ces phénomènes pourra être appelé à suggérer cette existence supérieure qui est partout présente, et chaque objet de la nature... devra devenir symbole. Et puisque tout conduit à l'esprit absolu, on conçoit l'infinie complexité d'interprétation de toute chose, qui laissera donc aux poètes une source intarissable de symboles.⁷⁵

A final implication of the theory of symbols is that the symbol is the vehicle of *synthesis* between the various orders of

⁷⁵ Georges Vanor, *L'art Symboliste*, (1889), pp. 40-42. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 46-47.

Albert Aurier articulated comprehensively the theurgic nature of the artist in a significant passage from his essay on Gauguin:

Cet homme qui, grâce à son génie natif, grâce à des virtus acquises, se trouve, devant la nature, sachant lire en chaque objet la signification abstraite, l'idée primordiale et supplanante, cet homme qui, par son intelligence et par son adresse, sait se servir des objets comme d'un sublime alphabet pour exprimer les Idées dont il a la révélation, serait-il vraiment, par cela même, un artiste complet? Serait-il l'Artiste?

N'est-il pas plutôt un génial savant, un suprême formuleur qui sait écrire les Idées à la façon d'un mathématicien? N'est-il pas en quelque sorte un algébriste des Idées, et son oeuvre n'est-elle point une merveilleuse équation, ou plutôt une page d'écriture idéographique rappelant les textes hiéroglyphes des obélisques de l'antique Egypte?

Oui \, sans doute, l'artiste, s'il n'a point quelque autre don psychique, ne sera que cela, car il ne sera qu'un *compréhensif exprimeur*, et si la compréhension, complétée par le *pouvoir d'exprimer*, suffit à constituer le savant, elle ne suffit pas à constituer l'artiste.

Albert Aurier, *Le Symbolisme en Peinture*, 1891, in *Oeuvres posthumes*, pp.216-218, Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 66-67.

⁷⁶ Jean Thorel, *Les Romantiques allemands et les Symbolistes française*, 1891. Quoted in Michaud *Documents, ibid.*, p. 61.

reality: material, psychological and spiritual. According to Thorel, 'le symbole joue ce rôle synthétique, aliment aux sens, à l'âme, à l'esprit, qu'il est d'essence supérieure à la comparaison et à l'allégorie, lesquelles distinguent et séparent ce que le symbole unit et joint ensemble pour en faire une seule et même chose'.⁷⁷ Indeed the notion of synthesis is an important concept in Symbolist aesthetics.⁷⁸ It involved the fusion of various elements in the real world with those derived from the imagination and the spiritual order to create a new, separate and self-sufficient reality, in other words, to express the true or 'Absolute' order of reality of unity and oneness. Symbolist activity was thus seen to be an immense effort of synthesis: synthesis between the arts, synthesis of man, and the synthesis of creation.⁷⁹ Charles Morice wrote:

Loi commune qui dirige, A cette heure, tous les efforts artistiques: l'Art remonte à ses origines et, comme au commencement il était un, voici qu'il rentre dans l'originelle voie de l'Unité, où la Musique, la Peinture et la Poésie, triple reflet de la même centrale clarté... Du moins pour se préparer à porter le formidable honneur futur, le Poète se sent le devoir d'accomplir en lui-même, en son art même une Synthèse comme symbolique de la Synthèse finale ordonnée par évolution de l'idée esthétique... Oui, on peut s'unir pour l'Analyse; la Synthèse sépare. Le 'tout en un' fait que personne n'a besoin de personne. Il faut la solitude pour laisser la vie converger toute en une seule intelligence et toute fleurir sous une seule main... des jeunes poètes me révèle ce qu'il y a au fond de leur pensée, ce qu'ils cherchent... Au fond de leur pensée il y a le désir: *Tout*. La synthèse esthétique, voilà ce qu'ils cherchent.⁸⁰

The deep concern with the notion of synthesis, another fundamental tenet of Idealist philosophy, extended to one of the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Vide* Lucie-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁷⁹ *Vide* Michaud, *Documents, op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁸⁰ Charles Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*, 1889, pp.287-297. Quote in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 102.

more enigmatic images and symbols in non-Realist art, namely the androgyne. This was the image *par excellence* during the *fin-de-siècle* expressing the notion of synthesis, self sufficiency and the original order of reality. This aspect of Idealist philosophy articulated in the symbol of the androgyne will be discussed in Chapter Four.

With regard to the particular theory of the symbol in non-Realist thinking, the work of art is regarded as the ultimate medium through which the transcendental is expressed, and is thus seen as a species of symbol in non-Realist aesthetics. The artist, in his turn, is regarded as the most able to express that realm through the work of art. Charles Morice summarised the theory of the symbol, as a means through which the Ideal world of spirit is revealed, in relation to the artist and the work of art:

n'est oeuvre d'art que celle qui précisément commence où elle semblerait finir, celle dont le symbolisme est comme une porte vibrante dont les gondes harmonieux font tressaillir l'âme dans toute son humanité béante au Mystère, et non pas s'exalter dans une seulement des parts du composé humain, et non plus dans l'esprit seulement que seulement dans les sens; celle qui révèle, celle dont la perfection de la forme consiste surtout à effacer cette forme pour ne laisser persister dans l'ébranlement de la Pensée que l'apparition vague et charmante, charmante et dominatrice, dominatrice et féconde d'une entité divine de l'Infini. Car la forme, dans l'oeuvre ainsi parfaite et idéale, n'est que l'appât offert à la séduction sensuelle pour qu'ils soient apaisés, endormis dans un ivresse délicieuse et laissent l'esprit libre, les sens enchantés de reconnaître les lignes et les sons primitifs, les formes non trahies par l'artifice et que trouve le génie dans sa communion avec la Nature. Ainsi entendu, l'Art n'est pas que la révélateur de l'infini: il est au Poète un moyen même d'y pénétrer. Il y va plus profonde qu'aucune Philosophie, il y prolongue et répercute la révélation d'un Evangile, il est une lumière qui appelle la lumière, comme un flambeau éveille mille

feux aux voûtes naguère endormies d'une grotte de cristal; - il sait ce que l'artiste ne sait pas.⁸¹

Moreover, for the Symbolists, as for the Romantics before them, the artist was exalted as a seer or magus. The artist was seen to possess the required faculties to penetrate the world of appearances and to divine spiritual knowledge hidden in forms. V.-E. Michelet wrote, 'Qu'est-ce que le Poète?... C'est une des incarnations sous lesquelles se manifeste le Révélateur, le Héros, l'Homme que Carlyle appelle "un mesanger envoyé de l'impénétrable infini avec des voyelles pour nous"... Le poète doit avoir pénétré ce que Goethe appelait "le secret ouvert."⁸² Moreover, the artist acted as demiurge in so far as the products of his creativity emulated the original act of Creation. Saint-Pol-Roux wrote, 'Le rôle du Poète consiste donc en ceci: réaliser Dieu. L'oeuvre du Poète est une création, mais une seconde création, puisqu'il met à contribution les membres de Dieu'.⁸³

⁸¹ Charles Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*, 1889. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 63. Emphasis in original.

⁸² V.-E. Michelet, *De l'Esotérisme dans l'Art*, 1891, pp. 9-11. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸³ Saint-Pol-Roux, 'Réponse à une Enquête', in J. Huret, *Enquête sur l'Evolution littéraire*, pp. 148-149. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 18.

Similarly, in the view of Joseph Péladan, the artist was given the status of priest or magus in his capacity to perform the task of revealing the transcendental reality of the Ideal, Péladan wrote:

Artist, thou art priest: Art is the great mystery: and if your attempts turn out to be a masterwork, a divine ray descends, as on an altar... Artist, thou art king: art is the real kingdom... drawing on the spirit, outline of the soul, form of understanding, you embody our dreams... Artist, thou art magician: art is the great miracle and proves our immortality... You may close the church, but the museum? The Louvre will be the temple, when Notre Dame is desecrated.

Joseph Péladan, 'Catalogue to the First Salon de la Rose+Croix'. Quoted in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France, Joseph Péladan and the Salons de la Rose+Croix*, doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1968, p. 105.

For further discussion on the theurgic nature of art and the special role of the artist, *vide* Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 14 et seq.;

Furthermore, in Symbolist thinking, the apprehension of a work of art is accompanied by a specific aesthetic response. The transcendental value, the Idea, expressed in a poem or painting through the creative activity of the artist, invokes a particular reaction in the perceiver which is marked by a characteristic affective experience. Albert Aurier gave explicit articulation to this aspect of Symbolist aesthetics:

[l'Artiste]... lui faudra, pour être réellement digne de ce beau titre de noblesse - si pollué en notre industrialiste aujourd'hui - joindre à ce pouvoir de compréhension un don plus sublime encore, je veux parler du don d'émotivité, non point certes cette émotivité que sait tout homme devant les illusoirs combinaisons passionnelles des êtres et des objets, non point cette émotivité que savent les chansonniers de café-concert et les fabricants de chromo - mais cette transcendante émotivité, si grande et si précieuse, qui fait frissonner l'âme devant le drame ondoyant des abstractions.⁸⁴

The expression of the Idea through the symbol by the artist which arouses this heightened affective state is the complete and comprehensive articulation of Symbolist artistic activity. The work of art is seen to induce a special resonance in the viewer which conveys him or her to the apprehension of a transcendental value expressed through the work of art which therefore conveys knowledge of the spirit. Aurier continues:

Oh! combien sont rares ceux dont s'émeuvent les corps et les coeurs au sublime spectacle de l'Etre et des Idées pures! Mais aussi cela est le don *sine qua non*, cela est l'étincelle que voulait Pygmalion pour sa Galatée, cela est l'illumination, la clef d'or, le Daimôn, la Muse... Grâce à ce don, les symboles, c'est-à-dire les Idées, surgissent des ténèbres,

Mathews, *op. cit.*, p. 28 et seq.; and Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 50 et seq. For a discussion of the notion of artist as 'priest', 'magus' or 'seer', in Romantic culture, *vide* Ralph Tymms, *German Romantic Literature*, Methuen and Company, London, 1955, pp. 152-154.

⁸⁴ Albert Aurier, *Le Symbolisme en peinture*, in *Oeuvres posthumes*, pp. 216-218. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 67.

s'animent, se mettent à vivre d'une vie qui n'est plus notre vie contingente et relative, d'une vie éblouissante qui est la vie essentielle, la vie de l'Art, l'être de l'Etre... Grâce à ce don, l'art complet, parfait, absolu, existe enfin.⁸⁵

IV

Symbolist Practice: A Language of Suggestion

An essential issue in Symbolist artistic practice was the search for a means to articulate, in the language of artistic or poetic expression, the ineffable and intangible world of the spirit and the mystical - the Ideal. The visual or verbal language and syntax developed by the Symbolists to achieve their aesthetic aims through the respective artistic media, in order to express not a physical and sensual reality, but an inner reality of the mystical and transcendental, through the symbol was based on the principles of evocation and *suggestion*. In other words, the image never refers to its actual subject directly but only indirectly; it hints at something without naming it precisely. Charles Morice wrote: 'Quant au symbole, c'est le mélange des objets qui ont éveillé nos sentiments et de notre âme, en une fiction. Le moyen, c'est la suggestion: il s'agit de donner aux gens le souvenir de quelque chose qu'ils n'ont jamais vu'.⁸⁶ According to Mallarmé, suggestion was seen to be the means most suited to the expression of the inner state of the soul and the mystery of the spirit:

Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois-quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu; le suggérer, voilà le rêve. C'est le parfait usage de ce mystère qui constitue le

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Charles Morice, *Réponse à une Enquête*, in J. Huret, *Enquête sur l'Evolution littéraire*, p. 85. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, ibid.*, p. 74.

symbole: évoquer petit un objet pour montrer un état d'âme, par une série de déchiffrements.⁸⁷

Indeed, the principle of suggestion was seen as the essential means of bridging the gap between the sensible and supersensible worlds, between nature and the soul. According to Charles Morice, suggestion realises this correspondence between the two orders of reality:

La Suggestion peut ce que ne pourrait l'expression. La suggestion est le langage des correspondences et des affinités de l'ame et de la nature. Au lieu d'*exprimer* des choses leur reflet, elle pénètre en elles et devient leur propre voix. La suggestion n'est jamais indifférente et, d'essence, est toujours nouvelle car c'est le caché, l'inexpliqué et l'*inexprimable* des choses qu'elle dit... Surtout, comme elle parle dans les choses dont elle parle, elle parle aussi dans les âmes auxquelles elle parle: comme le son, l'écho, elle éveille le sentiment de l'expression impossible dans l'esprit de l'attentif...⁸⁸

The formal means of expression employed by Symbolist artists to achieve these ends in visual and poetic expression was directed towards a return to the *essential* elements of artistic expression. In music it was the awareness of the expressive potential in *rhythm* and *harmony*; in poetry, the awareness of the expressive potential in rhythmic configurations of vowels, consonants and syllables.⁸⁹ In painting, this meant the awareness of the expressive potential in harmonic configurations of line and colour. This resulted in the *simplification* and

⁸⁷ Mallarmé, *Réponse à une Enquête*, in J. Huret, *ibid.*, p. 60. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *ibid.*, p. 74. Vide also René Ghil, 'Symboliser est évoquer, non dire et narrer et peindre: la chose n'est maîtresse que lorsque (elle-même mise en oubli) de par ses qualités seules de rêve et de suggestion elle renaît idéalement et perce de la pensée qu'elle devient le voile volontaire'. 'Notre Ecole', *La Décadence*, no. 1, 1^{ère} octobre 1886. Quoted in Michaud, *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Charles Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*, 1889, p. 378-379. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *ibid.*, p. 76.

⁸⁹ Vide René Ghil, *En Méthode à l'Oeuvre*, 1891. In Michaud, *Documents*, *ibid.*, p. 86.

reduction of form and was directed, through plastic means, towards the search for and expression of the essential rhythms in nature - where the rhythms and harmonies of line and colour emulate the rhythm and harmonies of spiritual and natural life. Gustav Moreau stated this aim succinctly with regard to his own artistic approach:

How admirable is that art which, under a material envelope, mirror of physical beauty, reflects also the movements of the soul, of the spirit, of the heart and the imagination, and responds to the divine necessities felt by humanity throughout the ages. It is the language of God!... To this eloquence, whose character, nature, and power have up to now resisted definition, I have given all my care, all my efforts: to the evocation of thought through line, arabesque, and all the means open to the plastic arts - that has been my aim.⁹⁰

To this effect, much of Symbolist art is related to the stylistic conventions of Art Nouveau which is characterised by a simplification in line, form and colour and an emphasis on the rhythmic flow of lines, i.e. the arabesque and its interaction with colour and colour harmonies. This style is characterised by a flattening of form - objects are no longer articulated 'in the round', through the subtle gradation of tone using highlights, middle-tones and darks to represent three dimensional form. Moreover, there is a 'flattening' of space where the illusion of depth created through the principles of mathematical or linear perspective are abandoned. A new approach to the use of colour emerges, where objects no longer appear in 'natural' colour, rather colours are used in harmonic relationships which are related across the surface of the work. The result of the use of these devices is a greater emphasis on the flat surface of the support. A new decorative surface is created where rhythms of lines and colours create a new expressive effect by which the new

⁹⁰ Gustav Moreau, quoted in Lucie-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

aesthetic could be realised through visual means. The recourse to the use of line as a means of the expression of abstract ideas is related to, for example, Blake's notion that the line is the perfect vehicle for the expression of the spiritual, or the idea, in so far as it is abstract and does not appear in nature. During the period, Péladan articulated the same formula and stated, 'Line is sufficient for metaphysical expression: it is the letter of plastic writing...'⁹¹ This emphasis on the linear and the arabesque is also evident in medieval art where it is exploited for the explicit purpose of expressing a spiritual and non-physical order of reality. In a similar vein, the use of colour as a vehicle for the expression of the spiritual is historically related to Romanticism. For example, the colour blue, in particular, assumes a special significance in so far as it is seen to be symbolic of the spiritual realm, personified in the symbol of the Blue Flower motif. Moreover, the correspondence between certain colours and subjective states of feeling and intuition, or spirit, occurs in the works of Delacroix and later in the works of Gauguin and generally in Symbolist art.

The emphasis on the formal means of expression, to suggest a different order of reality, through the reduction of and simplification in the use of line and colour, and the emphasis on the pictorial rhythms created through the arabesque, is illustrated, for example, in the works of the Dutch Symbolist painter Jan Toorop (1848-1928) and is personified in his painting, *The Three Brides* (1893). Toorop uses the hair and drapery of the figures surrounding the Brides in a strikingly decorative way locking the figures together through organic, angular and curvilinear arabesques. The contrast in the

⁹¹ Joseph Péladan, 'La Collection Jusky de dessins de maîtres anciens', *L'Artiste*, March, 1883, p. 184. Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

delineation of the hair in the figures behind the Brides corresponds to the respective attributes of the two outer Brides where the curvilinear organic arabesques of the figures on the left personify the angelic and 'celestial' attributes of the Bride on the left, and conversely, the angular formations of the hair of the figures on the right personify the harsher qualities of the horned 'infernal' Bride on the right. This simple, yet effective, symbolic expression of the patterns created through the use of line adds a further dimension to the possibilities of the arabesque. The vivid interplay between formal elements such as the line, used in an essentially decorative way, and the figurative, yet somewhat stylised, forms seen in the representation of the female figures, alludes to the relationship between the 'abstract' and the 'real'. This interplay suggests, moreover, that the reference structure of the work is of a different order of reality, which is *conceptual*. Other works by Toorop, for example *Fate* (1893) [Fig. 1] and *The Song of Time* (1893) [Delevoy, 1979:153] express the same interest in a conceptual or symbolic order of reality.

It is essentially through the need to express an Ideal subject matter that recourse was made in Symbolist art to the development of an 'Ideal' visual language. Symbolist art is *prima facie* articulated in the visual syntax of naturalism and the figurative tradition. This appears as a paradoxical or contradictory element in their art in so far as naturalism is fundamentally the language of the material order and would therefore seem wholly inappropriate for the expression of an essentially abstract and conceptual order of reality - the Ideal. This is, however, in keeping with the Idealist construction of reality discussed above concerning the relationship between the Ideal and the material. The Symbolists would exploit the visual syntax of naturalism in so far as it was understood to be the means most suited to the

expression and articulation of the natural and material order of reality. As already discussed, the natural order of reality was seen, in Idealist terms, to be the means through which the Ideal order is revealed in the material plane. It will be remembered that in so far as material objects are understood to mediate between the material order and Ideal order they act as *symbols*. The work of art, therefore, is seen as ^aspecial class of material object, or symbol, through which this Ideal or conceptual order is revealed and attained. It could therefore be understood that the articulation of forms in a visual language derived from naturalism, in other words through the language of materialism, in the work of art is therefore directed towards this end. It should be stressed, however, that Symbolist naturalism is not the transparent naturalism of, for example, realist art. Closer analysis of Symbolist style reveals subtle ruptures in the use of formal elements, in line, colour and the delineation of space, employed to articulate their subjects. These ruptures act as cues which prohibit a purely materialistic reading of the image and refer the viewer to a different, conceptual order of reality. This rupture within the style of much of Symbolist art reinforces the conceptual nature of the subject matter itself. One is therefore forced to access the image from the point of view of the essentially Idealist (subjective) or conceptual content it evokes.

Fernand Khnopff's pastel drawing titled *Memories* (1889) suggests this mode of visual expression. Khnopff depicts seven women dressed in contemporary fashions, four of whom hold tennis rackets. The women are placed in the outdoors in what would appear to be a garden closed in by a hedge in the background. One is immediately struck by the high degree to which the figures are articulated in a naturalistic or representational sense especially with regard to the precise detail in the clothing and

the rackets. One is invited to interpret the scene in a narrative or naturalistic way. Yet, on closer analysis, one becomes aware that the image does not resolve itself completely in terms of a purely narrative, or naturalistic, interpretation. There is a strong sense of disengagement between the figures where actual interaction and interrelation is slight if not entirely absent. The women, moreover, do not seem to be engaged in any defined activity, but seem rather to be posed in a deliberate, if not artificial way. There is no sense of what they have been doing, what they are doing or what they are about to do. This suggests an absence of time expressed through the lack of any indication of action continuing into the future or emerging from the past. The figures, in other words, appear to be locked in time, in an eternal present. Moreover, it is evident that each figure is based on the same model. Each shares similar features and distinctively reddish hair. It is known that the composition was derived from individual photographs of Khnopff's sister, whom he used throughout his life as a model for his paintings, where these exact features are repeated.⁹² The identity of each figure repeated in various poses would suggest that time is cancelled through the use of the same model.

One is struck, moreover, by the stark contrast in the high degree of articulation in the treatment of the figures, on the one hand, and in the environment in which they are placed, which is barely suggested, on the other. The minimal indication of a lawn and hedge suggests an indefinite or indeterminate environment which is on the whole 'abstract', lacking the sense of a natural or 'real' contemporary setting. The figures could therefore be seen to be in a conceptual, rather than a natural, space. The

⁹² Several of which are reproduced in Delevoy, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

suggestion of abstract time (narrative), abstract space and action in this work leads one to a reading of the image in a more conceptual way in so far as it represents a different order of pictorial representation, suggesting a different order of reality itself.

The contrast in the use of naturalistic elements of representation with non-naturalistic elements in this work leads to a disjunction in the reading of the image and suggests a new order of reality, a pictorial or conceptual order. In other words, it has more to do with 'idea' than with representation as such. This combination of realistic and abstract elements is an overt characteristic in Symbolist art and is explicable in terms of their theory of the symbol and the notion of suggestion dealt with in the preceding section. This conceptual approach to visual expression will become especially apparent in the discussion on the Ideal feminine.⁹³

Meaning in Symbolist art, moreover, is indeterminate and cannot be resolved categorically. Meaning is evoked through allusion and suggestion through what is partly known and what is unknown. The work can be seen to be reflexive, in so far as it refers to its own pictorial reality above the natural order of reality. Moreover, it forces one back on oneself, to struggle with one's own resources of interpretation and experience as the basis from which to access meaning. This is a quality of all non-Realist art (and indeed much of abstract art during the century to come)

⁹³ It may be worth noting that the 'non-realism' of Symbolist painters took several different forms ranging from an abstraction in the formal means of expression, for example, the simplification and reduction in the use of line and colour, to the manipulation of pictorial elements, for example, in the combination of the natural with the imaginary. This resulted in a range of Symbolist styles.

based on the principles of allusion and suggestion - in so far as the subjectivity of the viewer is as much a part of the ultimate significance of a work of art as is the original creative impulse from which the work emerged. Viewer, work of art and artist are thus united in a creative matrix which extends beyond the limits of matter and the material order of reality.

The analysis of Khnopff's work highlights some of the essential features of much of the visual art of the Symbolist movement. The complexities of plastic representation in Symbolist art will be returned to again in Chapter I. This will be discussed with specific reference to the representation of the feminine in Symbolist art which will provide a basis for the interpretation of the image of the feminine in the chapters to follow.

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMININE
IN SYMBOLIST ART

The representation of the feminine in the art of the non-Realist period is highly conceptualised and, in most instances, embodies many of the issues derived from the spiritual and cultural ethos of the late nineteenth century, which have been discussed at length in the previous chapter. As will be further discussed, the image of the feminine is a construct derived from the subjective needs of the artist and is a representation of an inner force of a psychological or spiritual nature. Moreover, the image of the feminine can be understood as a visual construction of highly complex theoretical and philosophical ideas fundamental to *fin-de-siècle* Idealism. The conceptual and subjective nature of many representations of the feminine during the period has already been indicated by Howe who writes:

The image of woman described by Symbolist writers and authors was for the most part a projection of male fantasies and ideas. The Symbolists were, of course, fully aware of this. Symbolist artists had little interest in realism, except as it would further clarify or add precision to their images and ideas. The predominant usage of the image of woman as a symbolic vehicle indirectly reveals much about the *fin-de-siècle*, but it should not be assumed too readily that the artists and writers intended to depict reality in anything but allegorical terms. It is for this reason that Symbolist images are so psychologically revelatory. Freed from the constraints of realism and the prospect of being held accountable for the inspiration of his scenes, the Symbolist artist was able to give free rein to his deepest thoughts.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Jeffrey, W. Howe, *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*, U. M. I. Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979, p. 137.

It is for this reason that the term, 'the mythic feminine' is adopted in this paper, to refer to the conceptual nature of the image of the feminine in the art of the non-Realist period, as opposed to the representation of women in a historically or culturally specific context. It may be possible to distinguish several aspects of the representations of the feminine in non-realist art which differentiate them from representations in other periods in art history, and the nineteenth century in particular: the philosophical theories which informed non-realist aesthetics, in particular philosophical and mystical Idealism, as well as theoretical ideas derived from the esoteric and hermetic tradition and the visual characteristics of the image of the feminine. It may be useful to discuss some of these visual characteristics of the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art and to attempt to determine some of the characteristics of the non-Realists' visual language in which the representation of the feminine is articulated.

I

Visual Syntax of the Mythic Feminine

To facilitate the analysis of the visual language adopted by the Symbolists in their representation of the feminine, several areas of representation, not necessarily wholly distinct from each other, will be emphasised: i) the degree of neutrality to which the representation conforms to a description of women in reality, ii) the type of activity in which the represented woman is involved iii) the setting or environment in which women are depicted and iv) the degree of individual character portrayed. To distinguish these qualities more clearly, examples of paintings from the Symbolist tradition will be contrasted with those from the realist tradition.

i) *Neutrality of Representation*

In a selection of three works painted in the 'realist' idiom: Renoir, *The Boating Party* (1881), Degas, *Ballet Rehearsal* (1874) and Monet *The Picnic* (1866), the following generalisation with regard to the neutrality of representation of women can be stated: On the whole, it is evident that there is an attempt to record a factual description of the women in these images. Although there may be sociological implications in the situations of the women depicted, there is no attempt to impart a greater significance to the representation other than a neutral or 'objective' rendering of the scene, of woman in reality. Thus, for example, the Renoir describes a scene in which women participate in a leisurely meal and are represented *prima facie* in various attitudes which could be described as 'usual' in the context of such an activity: drinking wine, playing with a dog, chatting to a man or listening distractedly from a distance. One is hard pressed to interpret the scene on a deeper level, in terms of, for example, allegorical or metaphysical content, nor is one challenged to do so. The respective works by Degas and Monet similarly can be viewed in which there is no attempt to situate the women represented in an iconic or allegorical context. They can be viewed rather as factual or symbolically *neutral descriptions* of women in a particular contemporary setting.

The representation of women in non-realist art, on the other hand, is largely conceptualised and functions as a vehicle for a symbolic construct, theme or abstract idea. For example, Jan Toorop's *Fate* (1893) represents a black clad female figure linked by a long ribbon of drapery to a semi-nude floating female form and surrounded by other female forms in various hieratic poses. This image evokes the syntax of the dream, of fantasy and the

imagination, rather than a situation which is possible, or likely, in reality. The precise iconography of this work is unclear, and the precise meaning, if any, is suggested through the relationship between the figures only. The ritual-like procession of figures behind the standing black-robed figure and the naked figures posturing in the grave would suggest an association between the feminine as 'fate' and death. The association between the feminine and death is a common theme in Symbolist painting which will be explored in further detail in the following chapter.

In Jean Delville's *The Idol of Perversity* (1891) [Fig. 2], a naked female figure is represented clad in a crown of flowers from which serpents emerge like rays. A snake is represented slithering between her breasts and across her forehead. Delville's work is in many respects a synopsis of the negative feminine, which is the subject of Chapter Two. The face has a menacing, almost evil, quality to it which is emphasised in so far as it is rendered in almost complete shadow. The two narrow eyes seem to have their own light and glow eerily in the darkness of the face imparting to it a mask-like quality. The dramatic light from above throws the breasts and belly in relief, emphasising the torso as a zone of sensuality and eroticism. Moreover, the lethal diadem of writhing serpents and the serpent between the breasts suggests the themes of the Medusa and Cleopatra, both popular figures in *fin-de-siècle* art, suggesting that this figure is a goddess of death. Clearly this is a conceptualised representation of the feminine and bears little reference to woman in reality. The association, suggested in this image between the feminine and eroticism and death was an important issue in Symbolist art, also to be discussed further in the following chapter.

In Khnopff's *Un Ange* (1881) [Fig. 3] a hieratically posed figure in armour is depicted with a half-female, half-feline creature at her feet. This work, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, appears to deal with the relationship between polarities, between vertical and horizontal, between the 'angelic' and the animal, the spiritual and the sensual. The hybrid feline feminine is clearly a conceptual construct, a conflation of two disparate forms, the meaning of which partakes of both, but ultimately, of neither and functions hence as a symbol.

Clearly, none of these images could be said to be a description of woman as one would experience her in reality. Rather, they refer to a different order of reality which is largely conceptual and belonging to the realm of the subjective and the imagination. Moreover, they are not 'neutral' in the sense of being factual descriptions of women in a specific contemporary setting. Rather, they can be seen to represent a particular value associated with the feminine as such, for example, as a personification of death, sensuality or the animal (nature), which challenges the viewer to interpret these images conceptually.

ii) Description of Action (Themes and Narrative)

Women in Realist paintings are usually engaged in 'typical' social or cultural activities associated with urban life, for example, bourgeois women at an outdoor gathering, as seen in for example, Monet's *Women in the Garden* (1866) and Manet's *Concert at the Tuileries* (1862). Degas' essays on women performers and prostitutes are also particularly instructive in this regard, for example, his *Dancers on the Stage* (1878), *Cafe Concert* (1877) and *L'Hente* (1874). Again, these examples illustrate the tendency in realist art to describe, in a factual or 'neutral' manner, the

various activities in which women were involved, in a particular contemporary historical setting, without implying any deeper or symbolic significance to these activities. The representations of the feminine in non-realist imagery, on the contrary, are seldom, if ever, depicted in the context of a definable 'social' or 'cultural' activity. Rather, the feminine figures in Symbolist works are generally engaged in some form of abstract activity. This is clearly evident in the examples already cited. In none of these works is the exact nature of the activities of these figures explicitly clear. The type of activity, or lack of activity, reinforces the abstract and conceptual character of these images.

In many Symbolist images, the representation of activity refers to a mythical or imaginary episode or, alternatively, to an undefinable activity lacking a narrative that can be precisely described. In Rops' *Pornocrates* (1896) [Delevoy, 1979:127], for example, a voluptuous blindfolded female figure is depicted walking a pig and surrounded by three frolicking putti. This situation bears little reference to an event likely to be experienced in reality but, is constructed rather in the syntax of allegory and the symbol. The woman is blindfolded and is dressed in blue-gartered black stockings, long black gloves and a blue ribbon tied around her torso under her breasts. She parades, with her pig, on a classical pediment with four reliefs of dejected looking figures representing the four arts: painting, poetry, music and sculpture. The pornocracy is the 'dominance of prostitutes' (O.E.D.) which suggests that this work has to do with the dominance of the erotic over the aesthetic. In Symbolist terms, as will be seen in the succeeding chapters, this reads as the dominance of matter over spirit.

A more extreme treatment of legendary or mythical themes is Lucien Levy-Dhurmer's *Salome embracing the Severed Head of John the Baptist* (1896) [Fig. 4] and Edvard Munch's *Vampire* (c. 1893) [Delevoy, 1979:135]. These portray themes derived from Biblical history and myth and suggest the archetypal theme of the predatory, seductive female whose gory lust preys on male sexual vulnerability. This was a dominant motif associated with the negative aspect of the mythic feminine in Symbolist art during the *fin-de-siècle* and will be treated in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Many of Khnopff's representations of the feminine depict no definable activity at all or indicate directly 'what' the image is about. This is evident in for example, *Près de la Mer* (1890) [Fig. 48] and *I Lock my Door Upon Myself* (1891) [Fig. 6]. The depiction in these works of a solitary female figure enclosed in an interior of silence hardly discloses a means of interpretation derived from conventional associations. Nor do the images suggest that they are straightforward portrait studies in themselves. In these works, meaning is not directly stated and is therefore not immediately apprehended, but is conveyed, rather, through the syntax of allusion and suggestion. It is immediately evident in all these works that, in terms of the representations of activities of the female figures represented, and themes derived from those activities, these images are constructed in an abstract and conceptualised form and provide no factual reference to woman in reality.

iii) Environment and Setting

A further distinguishing feature of the representation of women in materialist and anti-naturalist art is the environment or setting in which women are portrayed. Woman in Realist paintings

are always depicted in natural or everyday environments, in other words, environments that exist in reality and with which one is normally familiar, for example, the outdoors, in parks or gardens; in cafes or bars, and in studios or interiors generally (see examples already cited). The image of the feminine in non-realist imagery, on the other hand, is usually constructed in imaginative, abstract or distorted environments. In many of the non-Realist images already referred to, the feminine figures are situated in an abstract space with little reference to a specific location or naturalistic environment.

This is also seen in, for example, Alfred Kubin's *The Bride of Death* (c. 1900) [Fig. 11] which depicts a thin female figure clad in white standing on a platform in front of a blank wall in a stark, barren space. The setting is hardly descriptive of an environment normally encountered in reality. The hieratic quality of the figure is enhanced in this sterile environment. As with many of the images already discussed, one is drawn to question what the meaning of the image could be. There is no reference to woman in reality, there is no sense of narrative, no sense of what has happened or what is about to happen. Thus, as much as there is no sense of actual space, there is no sense of time either. This image is typical of many Symbolist images in this regard in so far as the dimensions of time and space are largely absent which suggests that these works belong to a different, and overtly conceptual, order of reality - of the mind, the imagination and the unconscious.

This is further evident in Munch's *Meeting in Infinity* (1899) [Delevoy, 1979:161] which depicts a male and a female form floating against an abstract, dark background. Similarly the female form in Redon's *Death, my Irony surpasses all others*

(1899) is set in an abstract or conceptual 'space'. This is also seen in Klimpt's *The Sirens* (c. 1899) [Delevoy, 1979:131].

Another possibility with regard to articulation of environment in non-realist imagery is that the image of the feminine is placed in situations that allude to the natural world (interiors or landscapes), but that these are manipulated in some way to suggest that the setting is not wholly of the natural order of reality. For example, William Degouve de Nuncques' *Angels in the Night* (1894) [Delevoy, 1979:125] portrays three winged female forms in a moonlit wood articulated in a simplified and decorative manner which enhances the dream-like ambience and conceptual tenor of the work. The female figures in Maurice Denis' *The Holy Women at the Tomb* (1894) [Delevoy, 1979:85] are represented in a similarly simplified and decorative environment to the same effect. Khnopff's *Memories* (1889) [Fig. 54], discussed in the Introduction represents several female figures in an environment which only barely suggests a landscape.

On the whole it can be observed that the environment and its particular articulation in non-realist art modifies the context in which the subject is depicted and enhances the removed, 'abstract' or non-natural quality of the image itself. This again suggests the representation of world of the imagination and the conceptual rather than the real; the world of the idea rather than the physical or material world. The importance of the landscape and the interior as a symbolic setting for the feminine, as a symbol of the inner subjective realm, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

iv) Representation of Character

Women represented in the realist idiom are described with some degree of individual character in their faces and bodily poses to the extent that one could identify certain qualities of personality with which one would be familiar in persons in one's everyday experience. In the group scenes of Renoir, Manet, Degas and Monet, for example, there is an interest in the individual portrait and characterisation of the women represented. One could go as far as to say that they are depictions of women whom the artists may very well have met during that period. Symbolist representations of women, on the contrary, are largely generalised. In other words, there is seldom a sense of individual character or personality. The representations of women are usually reduced to type and stylised. Khnopff's representation of women are a good example of the generalised image of the female that is reduced to type: His favoured 'type' is characterised by a strong jaw-line, red hair and androgynous features, and is evident in many of his works dealing with the feminine, for example, *Who Shall Deliver Me* (1891) [Fig. 5], *Une Ville Morte* (1889) [Fig. 8], and *Du Silence* (1890) [Fig. 9]. None of the features of his women display any hint of individual character or personality but are derived from a formula emphasising their conceptual significance. This is so, it should be mentioned, despite the fact that Khnopff used his sister as a model.

A further feature of the non-realists' representation of the feminine is the distortion, exaggeration or generally 'bizarre' rendering of the features of the feminine. This is evident in most of the works already discussed. Delville's *Idol of Perversity* is striking in this regard. The figure in this work which, as already indicated, is demonic, almost terrifying.

Toorop's figures and Kubin's *Bride of Death* are similarly striking, almost theatrical in terms of the character portrayed through their facial features.

Jean Delville's *Portrait of Mrs Stuart Merrill* (1892) [Fig. 10], is another startling representation of the feminine. The emphasis is on the large green eyes which stare upwards exposing much of the eyeball as though the subject is in a trance. Most of the face is articulated without clearly defined outlines which gives the impression that the face is seen through gauze or a veil and so is altogether insubstantial and lacking materiality or tangibility. The head seems to be dissolving into the light and abstract space surrounding it. This suggests that this is less a portrait of the physical features of the woman than a portrait of the spiritual or etheric body of the subject. Thus, despite the work being referred to as a 'portrait', which suggests some likeness in reality, it is still a *conceptualised* articulation of the subject. The representation of figures in this way is common in Symbolist art as a means of suggesting the insubstantial or spiritual character of a subject. Many of Khnopff's figures of the feminine are articulated in this way.

To summarise the characteristics derived from the above discussion the following may be observed: the images of the feminine in non-Realist art are largely reduced to type; the feminine figures are generalised and have no individual qualities of personality or individual character; facial features can be distorted or exaggerated and poses are mostly hieratic and stylised. The representations of the feminine, moreover, are set in unspecified or abstract environments, on the one hand, or in generalised, naturalistic settings. They are engaged in abstract (as opposed to natural) or mythical-imaginary activities. Moreover, they are 'conceptualised' and can be seen to convey a

metaphoric or mythic theme or abstract idea. On the whole, one could observe that the non-realists' images of women are not determined with regard to a specific historical period or place (contrary to the Realists). In other words, they can be seen to be constructs of the imagination and refer to a different order of reality in so far as they are articulated in the syntax of dream and hallucination. The idea of woman, it can be argued, is not connected specifically to gender but is rather a stylised concept, or symbol - in the sense discussed in the Introduction.

Moreover, it is essentially the characteristics discussed above, taken as a whole, which distinguish the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art from other artistic traditions in which the image of the feminine is a sign for a metaphoric or allegorical construct, for example, 'Liberty' (Delacroix) and 'Hope' (Puvis de Chavannes), etc.

II

Symbolic Character of the Mythic Feminine

The conceptual aspect of the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art can be understood more readily in the context of the general aesthetic programme of the Symbolist period. This has already been dealt with in the Introduction but it may be instructive to review some of these ideas especially with regard to the aesthetics of the visual arts during that period.

The non-realist's objectives in painting concerning the articulation of ideas, concepts and subjective states of mind, and the formal means of achieving these, are largely summarised in Albert Aurier's seminal essay 'Le Symbolisme en Peintre: Paul Gauguin'. The assertion that the image of the feminine is

articulated in a formal syntax which enhances its conceptual nature may be supported through a discussion of the main ideas in Aurier's essay.

The basis of Aurier's theory is rooted in the Idealist aesthetic tradition, discussed at length in the Introduction, and is important in as much as it is an application of this larger theoretical perspective to the visual arts. The central Idealist idea of correspondences is summarised in Aurier's concept of *ideisme* (as opposed to *idealisme*). Painting is seen as the material representation or evocation of the 'Idea' which in the Platonic and neo-Platonic sense, on which Aurier founds this notion, is seen as the basis of reality itself. In other words, the Idea is seen as the basis of 'absolute truth'. Therefore art based on the Idea (ideistic art) is seen as more relevant to the expression of 'reality' than an art based on the articulation of sensory experiences. Aurier states in this regard:

ideistic art appears to be more elevated - more pure and more elevated through the complete purity and complete elevatedness that separates matter from idea. We can even affirm that the supreme art cannot be but ideistic, art by definition (as we know intuitively) being the representative materialisation of what is the highest and most truly divine in the world, of what is, in the last analysis, the only thing existent - the Idea.⁹⁵

Moreover, the 'ideistic' work of art is unique in that it is seen to be a reflection of the Idea which is encoded in its formal configuration. The material object serves, therefore, as the medium through which the Idea can be apprehended, in other words, it functions as a symbol in the sense discussed in the Introduction. Aurier states:

⁹⁵ Albert Aurier, 'Le Symbolisme en Peintre, Paul Gauguin', *Mecure de France*, Paris, II, 1891, pp. 159-164. Cited in Chipp, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

Indeed in the eyes of the artist, - that is, the one who must be the Expressor of Absolute Beings - objects are only relative beings which are nothing but a translation proportionate to the relativity of our intellects, of Ideas, of absolute and essential beings. Objects cannot have value more than objects as such. They can appear to him only as signs. They are the letters of an enormous alphabet which only the man of genius knows how to spell.⁹⁵

Thus the artist, the 'man of genius' is the mediator between the world of the Idea and the world of material objects - a familiar notion in Romantic aesthetics but probably derived from Schopenhauer whose ideas will be discussed in the following chapters. Aurier not only defines the position of the artist in relation to his programme of *ideiste* art, but also the formal means by which these objectives can be achieved. Aurier's dominant appeal in this regard is for a simplified and reduced means of expression in which the image is apprehended as a construct of the reality of the Idea only, in other words, the image is unequivocally a 'sign' and should be read as such. Aurier notes in this regard that:

It is necessary therefore that we should attain such a position that we cannot doubt that the objects in the painting have no meaning at all as objects, but are only signs, words having in themselves no other importance whatsoever.⁹⁷

To achieve this according to Aurier, the means of expression, the formal articulation of subject, should be simplified and reduced to its essentials. Painting is thus seen as the 'necessary simplification of the vocabulary of the sign'.⁹⁸ Illusionism and *trompe l'oeil* in itself, are seen to be deceptive in so far as they result in the erroneous tendency to view the art object as another object and part of the natural order. The artist should

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

avoid mimetic representation of his subject, for its own sake, but should rather select and synthesise essential details of the subject which convey the 'ideistic' significance of that subject.⁹⁹ To achieve this more precisely, Aurier suggests that the artist is entitled to go beyond the significant characteristics of the object and to distort these to express more clearly the Idea:

Yet, it is easy to deduce, the artist always has the right to exaggerate those directly significant qualities (forms, lines, colours, etc.) or to attenuate them, to deform them, not only according to his individual vision, not according to his personal subjectivity (as happens even in realist art), but merely exaggerate them, to attenuate them, to deform them according to the needs of the Idea to be expressed.¹⁰⁰

Aurier's ideas clearly pre-empt the ideas of the German Expressionist movement and especially those of Kandinsky (and the abstractionist tradition generally) in which art is viewed as a vehicle for the expression of the supersensory and transcendental and is seen, moreover, as being revelatory of the Divine.

In the light of the above discussion of Aurier's aesthetic programme, some of the characteristics of the representation of the feminine in non-realist art can be understood better. The characteristics of distortion (for example, of features and environment), simplification and reduction to 'type' can be seen as a means of articulating the essential idea of the feminine as

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92. Generally, the significance of the formal values in Symbolist art has been underplayed in the literature which has resulted in a general impoverishment in the interpretation of Symbolist painting. This paper emphasises that these aspects discussed here and in the Introduction, peculiar to the painting of the period, are intimately related to the general aesthetic goal to express a different order of reality based on the subjective and the transcendental.

such without referring to the idea of women *per se*, in other words, to a gender-specific description. Read in terms of Aurier's aesthetic, the image of the feminine acts as a sign conveying an abstract idea of the feminine. We can translate Aurier's words that objects in a painting have no meaning at all as objects but are only 'signs'(correspondences), to read that the image of the feminine has no reference to woman in reality and does not refer to real women in a temporally and spatially specific (historical) context, in terms of gender. Rather the image of the feminine is a specific symbolic construct, in the sense discussed in the Introduction, for the greater aim of expressing an idea or concept of the Idealist order of reality. Images of the feminine are therefore stylistically articulated in terms of distortion, exaggeration and attenuation (as outlined in the above discussion) to enhance these qualities. This is equally the case in works where the environment in which the feminine is depicted is distorted or attenuated (through the articulation of space and the use of line and colour) to suggest a different order of reality.

The notion that the feminine acts as a transpersonal force for the artist was a common theme in Romantic art and literature and continued into the Symbolist period. The image of the feminine in non-Realist art served as a vehicle for the expression of states of experience peculiar to the inner subjective realm of the imagination and the dream and embodied the essential philosophical principles which powered the non-Realist aesthetic programme, specifically, the fundamental opposition between Idealism and Materialism. It is for this reason that this paper prefers the term 'feminine', instead of 'woman', which will be understood to refer to this abstract and symbolic construction of reality expressed during the Symbolist period and to distinguish the image of the feminine in Symbolist art from other

artistic traditions or movements which refer directly to a more literal description of woman in reality.

This conceptual and symbolic nature of the representation of the feminine is the primary focus of this paper. A closer analysis of this aspect of the representation of the feminine reveals that, for the most part, a fundamental dichotomy exists within the expressive formulation of the feminine in non-Realist art. The image of the feminine, in other words, is polarised into a positive and negative aspect. A third form in which the feminine is constructed, moreover, is in the symbol of the androgyne.

The polarisation of the image of the feminine in non-Realist art is the essential characteristic of the mythical feminine in the art of the *fin-de-siècle* and forms the basis for the fundamental problem of opposites in Symbolist culture that was to determine the character of their epistemologies and aesthetic. For instance, the dichotomy between Idealism and Materialism; Good and Evil (God and Satan); Mysticism and Eroticism, is usually encoded in the image of the feminine. The polarity of the feminine can be seen to be significant from two perspectives: On the one hand, it personifies a conceptual or philosophical duality which was integral to Symbolist art and culture which has already been stressed as a fundamental aspect of Symbolist and *fin-de-siècle* culture in the Introduction. On the other, it can be interpreted as the expression of a subjective, psychological experience of the feminine and hence represents the respective polar aspects of the feminine principle. It is this *ambivalence* of the image of the feminine which is peculiar to the representation of woman during the Symbolist period. It should be stressed, moreover, that the use of the terms 'positive' and 'negative' with regard to the image of the feminine is entirely descriptive of the state of *polarity* which exists in the

representation of the feminine, much as for example the electrical poles of a battery, and is not a statement of value.

The negative pole of the representation of the mythic feminine personifies by the dark, destructive and 'evil' aspects of the feminine. One of the cogent themes of this facet of the feminine during the period was the symbol of the *femme fatale*. This paper will argue that this facet of the mythic feminine also corresponds to the Material order of reality and many of the symbolic attributes peculiar to this order, for example, nature, the instincts, eroticism and sensuality as well as death and decay all of which form part of the symbolic character of the negative feminine.

The negative feminine is also the site of transcendence through death and erotic love. This suggests an ambivalence with regard to these themes. As will be argued in the following chapters, an intimate relationship exists between the negative feminine and transcendence. The fascination with the destructive force associated with the negative feminine (equated with death and desire) is associated with the fascination or desire for transcendence through death itself as well as the 'death' experienced at the climax of desire.

On the other hand, the positive feminine is generally a symbol of the spiritual and transcendental, or in Symbolist terms, the Ideal. The positive or Ideal feminine, as it is referred to in this paper, is a personification of the Idealist notions of love and beauty. Moreover the positive feminine is the mediatrix between the material and the Ideal orders of reality and through which knowledge of the Ideal is attained. This aspect of the ideal feminine relates it to the tradition of initiation and transcendence, peculiar to the esoteric sciences, in which the

symbol of the feminine, as guide, is a central figure in the mysteries of initiation. Specific themes associated with the positive feminine are the Angel and the archetypal Mother (personified in the figure of Isis) as well as the motif of the veil as a symbol of the mystery of the feminine. A basic characteristic of the positive feminine, it will be stressed, is the notion of transcendence, where this symbol can be regarded as both a symbol of transcendence (the feminine as mediator) as well as the site of transcendence (the feminine personification of Ideal Love and Beauty).

It should be stressed that the attributes and characteristics of the *femme fatale* and Ideal feminine co-exist in a state of ambivalence, their mutually contradictory characters contribute to the essential paradox that is typical of the problem of opposites, a crucial problem in non-Realist culture. The essential feature of the mythical feminine is the *mutual and simultaneous co-existence* of both its positive and negative attributes. The representation of the feminine in non-Realist art is hence regarded as 'mythical' because of its bipolar aspect, i.e. that it is an expression of a deeper ontological duality.

The third aspect of the mythic feminine which is considered in this paper is the feminine as androgyne. The symbol of the androgyne partakes of many of the characteristics of the Ideal feminine, as personification of the Ideal, as mediator between the material and the Ideal, etc., but extends beyond these to include the principle of original wholeness and unity. It is the symbol of the reconciliation of opposites *par excellence* and is a prominent symbol during the late nineteenth century in this regard in so far as it served as part of the solution to the problem of schism and duality which formed a fundamental part of the ethos of the *fin-de-siècle*.

All three aspects of the feminine are related generally through the concept of transcendence. The fundamental desire to escape from material reality was expressed in a variety of ways in non-Realist culture. With regard to the image of the feminine, it is expressed in the notion of *desire*, which constituted an attempt to achieve a release from the world and, in some cases, from the self. Desire, whether physical or spiritual was a means of transcendence. Transcendence through the physical or erotic was part of the domain of the *femme fatale* which included the desire for death which, as shall be argued in this paper, was often equated with the sensual and erotic. On the other hand, transcendence through the spiritual was part of the experience of the positive feminine, and the androgyne, through which the ardent desire for the Ideal, i.e. the personification of the state of spiritual perfection, could be achieved.

These characteristics are the distinctive features of the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art which distinguishes it from other periods in art history. The philosophical basis of these qualities will be discussed at greater length in the following chapters. Before entering into a detailed discussion of these characteristics, a brief consideration of some of the possible artistic, literary and philosophical sources, specifically during the nineteenth century, from which this dual construct of the feminine was derived, should be undertaken. The most prominent artistic sources in which this theme is present are the poetry of Baudelaire and the music dramas of Richard Wagner.

Baudelaire's important work *Les Fleurs du Mal* is almost a complete expression of the aesthetic and ontological problems which would become integral to the poetry and art produced during the Symbolist period. The image of woman features prominently in

this work and bears all the characteristics of the representation of the feminine in Symbolist art especially with regard to the positive and negative feminine. In his work, the symbol of the feminine is articulated as a vehicle for the expression of the polarity between the material, sensual and erotic, on the one hand, and of the mystical and transcendental on the other. Guy Michaud summarises this aspect of Baudelaire's work:

C'est qu'il retrouve dans la Femme et dans l'amour les contradictions et le drame qui sont en lui, la Femme, être mythique et plein de mystère, à la fois ange et bête. Il y a chez Baudelaire... une mystique de l'amour, mystique à plusieurs degrés, où la beauté et la grâce, incarnées dans l'amour charnel, ne sauraient se défendre sans l'âme qui le parchève, où la femme devient l'instrument du surnaturel et procure au 'possédé' les jouissances suprêmes... [il] substituer à l'univers réel, à la femme qu'il aime, un univers de désires et de passions, un arrière-monde où la Femme serait l'ange annonciateur des Cieux Spirituels... la femme est double, comme l'homme, et plus encore que lui. Elle dispense, non l'oubli, mais un poison subtil; avec la tentation, elle glisse en nous le remords: femme, instrument du diable, femme, être méprisable et qui 'doit faire l'horreur', puisqu'elle ne sait qu remettre en face de nous-même en étant le miroir de ce qu'il y a de plus bas en nous: l'animalité.¹⁰¹

Baudelaire's poems dealing with the feminine are divided into two cycles. Those which construct the feminine in terms of a negative aspect belong to the cycle devoted to Jeanne Duval, while those in which the feminine is constructed in a positive sense belong to the cycle devoted to Apolonie Sabatier. Many of these poems will be considered in some detail in this paper where a thematic kinship can be discerned with regard to respective non-Realist works of art. In some cases it will be shown that some non-Realist works, and especially those of Félicien Rops, are

¹⁰¹ Guy Michaud, *Message Poétique du Symbolisme*, Librairie Nizet, Paris, 1947, pp. 56-57.

founded, iconographically, in Baudelaire's poetry particularly with regard to the representation of the feminine.

The same polarity with regard to the representation of the feminine can be found in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner. The major influence of Wagner's music-dramas as well as his political and aesthetic theories on non-Realist culture has already been mentioned. The influence of his representation of the feminine on non-Realist art has not been recognised. From his earliest operas, Wagner was concerned with the issue of the feminine and the related themes of love and transcendence also found in Symbolist aesthetics. An overt expression of this is his opera *Tannhäuser* (1845). The troubadour Heinrich Tannhäuser is torn between the sensual and sybaritic love of Venus and the chaste and virtuous love of Elizabeth. Unable to control his desire for the former, he is exiled and seeks redemption, but fails. Finally, Tannhäuser dies with a vision of Elizabeth and is redeemed. The opera's first performance in Paris in 1860 was an outright failure. Significantly, it was Baudelaire, himself a devotee of Wagner's work, who attempted to rescue Wagner's reputation in an article titled *Richard Wagner et 'Tannhäuser' à Paris*,¹⁰² which was later to have a significant influence in terms of spreading Wagner's music in France, especially amongst the Symbolists. Baudelaire's analysis of Wagner's opera is significant in so far as it betrays his own attitude towards the feminine which was, as already suggested, shared by the Symbolists. Baudelaire indicates that the opera is based on a fundamental duality expressed in the polarisation of the two feminine figures representing sensual and divine love. Baudelaire writes: '*Tannhäuser* représente la lutte des deux principes qui

¹⁰² Charles Baudelaire, *Richard Wagner et 'Tannhäuser' à Paris*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, op. cit., volume II, pp. 779-815. Hereafter cited as *Tannhäuser*.

ont choisi le coeur humain pour principal champ de bataille, c'est-à-dire de la chair avec l'esprit, de l'enfer avec le ciel, de Satan avec Dieu'.¹⁰³ Moreover, Baudelaire sees the 'Pilgrims' Song' in Act I as representing the movement towards the spiritual, i.e. towards God. This impulse is, however, obscured by the waxing control of desire, personified in the charms of the infernal Venus:

Mais comme le sens intime de Dieu est bientôt noyé dans toute conscience par les concupiscences de la chair, le chant représentatif de la sainteté est peu à peu submergé par les soupirs de la volupté. La vraie, la terrible, l'universelle Vénus se dresse déjà dans toutes les imaginations.¹⁰⁴

Baudelaire's identification of Venus, i.e. the negative feminine principle, with the sensual and hence the satanic is a central theme in his poetry and, as shall be discussed in chapter two, in the conception of the negative feminine in Symbolist art. He recognises the fact that Wagner's Venus is not the antique celestial goddess of Olympia, but, rather, the Goddess of hell and the consort of Satan:

Elle n'habite plus l'Olympe ni les rives d'un archipel parfumé. Elle est retirée au fond d'une caverne magnifique, il est vrai, mais illuminée par les feux qui ne sont pas ceux du bienveillant Phoebus. En descendant sous terre, Vénus s'est rapprochée de l'enfer, et elle va sans doute, à de certaines solennités abominables, rendre régulièrement hommage à l'Archidémon, prince de la chair et seigneur du péché.¹⁰⁵

Moreover, she is the 'l'idéal absolu de la volupté, avec la reine de toutes les diablesses'.¹⁰⁶ These ideas reverberate throughout Baudelaire's poetry concerning the negative feminine.

¹⁰³ Baudelaire, *Tannhäuser*, *ibid.*, p. 794.

¹⁰⁴ Baudelaire, *Tannhäuser*, *ibid.*, p. 794.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 790.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 796.

Huysmans also devoted an article, which appeared in the *Revue Wagnérienne*, to Wagner's music celebrating the essential elements of the Symbolists' construction of the negative feminine and *femme fatale*. Huysmans follows Baudelaire in his description of *Tannhäuser* in identifying the figure of Venus as the incarnation of absolute Evil. Huysmans wrote, in response to the opening of *Tannhäuser*:

From the orchestra the music rises in shrill cries of unbridled desire, piercing screams of lewd sensuality, outbursts of an eternal, supernatural carnality, and above a sinuous espalier of swooning, satiated nymphs, Venus rises. but this is not the familiar Venus of antiquity, the legendary Aphrodite, the pagan goddess of concupiscence, who reduced gods and men to whinnying fools. This Venus is terrible and profound, the living embodiment of the Spirit of Evil, the incarnation of Lust, all-powerful and irresistible. This Venus is a magnificent, enthralling She-Devil, forever preying on Christian souls, corrupt and utterly corrupting... she is an emblem of our material nature, an allegorical figure of Evil in conflict with Good, a symbol of man's grievous inner struggle between paradise and hell.¹⁰⁷

Wagner's operas, as already mentioned, construct the feminine in terms very much akin to those described in this paper. The polarisation of the feminine in Wagner's work is also evident in

¹⁰⁷ J.-K. Huysmans, *Revue Wagnérienne*. Quoted in Delevoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48, no references to source. In the same article, Huysmans suggests a fascinating psychological perspective regarding the contemporary quality of Wagner's creation which throws an interesting gloss over this aspect of the feminine experienced during this period, especially in the context of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence:

although Wagner's Venus has so much in common with the medieval allegorical figures, his concept of the goddess of love contains also a modern element. He has introduced a current of fine intellectual discernment into the savage flood of sensuality. To the naive images inherited from the past, Wagner's Venus brings a heightening of the sensations, and, by glorifying our refined and sharpened senses, suggests that the hero's destruction is completely unavoidable, as he is initiated suddenly into the complex spiritual wantonness of the exhausted times in which we live...

Huysmans, *ibid.* Quoted in Delevoy, *ibid.*

his opera *Lohengrin*, where Elsa von Brabant personifies the chaste, virginal feminine figure as opposed to Ortrud von Telramund, the dark scheming figure who undermines the nuptial bliss between Elsa and Lohengrin, the celestial knight and keeper of the Grail. Some of Wagner's women personify both aspects simultaneously, for example, Kundry from *Parzival* and Brünnhilde, the Valkyrie from *The Ring of the Niebelung*, etc. Both these characters, moreover, embody the principle of redemption through love (sensual and 'ideal') which is another central concept in the Symbolists' metaphysical aesthetics which will be discussed in chapters two and three.

Another possible source for the construct of the mythic feminine, which need only be mentioned briefly here, is occult science. Specifically the idea of the Shekinah, the feminine counterpart of God, is traditionally understood to have a dual aspect, and the notion of Sophia from the Gnostic tradition which was later adopted by alchemy is similarly understood to embody the principles of both matter and spirit, positive and negative. These figures are also agents of redemption and spiritual transformation. As already mentioned, occult ideas were current and topical in non-Realist circles. Many artists derived their knowledge and occult agenda from Joseph Péladan, who was deeply involved in occult science and especially the Kabbalah. There is strong evidence of his influence in the works of certain non-Realist artists for example, the Dutch Symbolist Jan Toorop. Toorop met Péladan in 1893 and his work after this date underwent significant iconographical developments especially in the image of the Bride, a central symbol of the Kabbalistic Shekinah.

In conclusion, it may be useful to introduce briefly the nature of the problem of the mythic feminine by way of an example from the visual arts of the period which encapsulates the essential

features of the representation of the negative and positive aspect of the mythic feminine, i.e. Fernand Khnopff's *L'Isolément* (1890-1894) [Fig. 13]. This work is significant in so far as the polarised image of the feminine is its central subject. This is usually not the case in Symbolist art where only one aspect of the feminine identity is expressed as the central theme of any given work.

Knopff's work is made up of three individual panels titled *Acrasia* (left panel), *Solitude* (centre panel) and *Britomart* (right panel). The subjects of the two outer panels are probably derived from Spencer's *The Faerie Queen*. *Acrasia* is the archetypal *femme fatale* and represented in the poem as the nude seductress and enchantress, in other words, the figure of sexual temptation. *Britomart* on the other hand, is the female heroine who disguises herself as a knight (as a sign of chastity), and dedicates her quest to find her true love, the knight *Artegall*. The central panel is a representation of Khnopff's sister whose features he used frequently in works which depicted his aesthetic ideal, i.e. the androgyne. The works suggest a reconciliation of duality, in so far as the androgynous figure, the central symbol of reconciliation and unity in Symbolist aesthetics, stands between the polarised representation of the feminine. If *Britomart* and *Acrasia* are seen to represent sacred and profane love respectively, then the central panel, the androgyne, could be seen as the synthesis of these two states and hence represents a transcendence of the world of physical (material) love and passion. The work, in its totality, would seem to suggest that the androgynous condition mediates and transcends the

antithetical poles of the mythical feminine, i.e. the *femme fatale* and the Ideal feminine.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ This has also been suggested in the literature on this period. Pierrot has indicated that the polarity of the representation of the feminine in the late nineteenth century was frequently resolved in the image of the androgyne. *Vide* Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900*. Translated by Derek Coltman, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 131 *et seq.* Similarly, Mario Amaya has suggested that:

The androgyne acted as a counterfoil to the sadistic female. Impotent and epicene, these ephebes offered themselves up like sacrificial lambs to the cause of Decadence. Brawny homosexual models were left to the longings of Lord Leighton, who disguised his pick-ups in classical drapery. But for the Symbolists there was a fascination with the feminine male in the guise of Apollo or some vague allegorical personage, such as Time, Poetry, Music or even the Heavenly Angel.

Mario Amaya, 'Flesh and Filigree', *Art News*, volume 68, December 1969, pp. 24-27, p. 27.

THE MYTHIC FEMININE AS *FEMME FATALE* AND
THE PERSONIFICATION OF MATTER, DEATH
AND EVIL IN SYMBOLIST ART

This chapter will focus on the 'negative' aspect of the mythic feminine. This includes the historical and mythical figures which personify the theme of the *femme fatale* such as Salome and the Sphinx. As will be discussed in this chapter, these figures express the aspect of the mythic feminine as cruel seducer and destroyer of men. They were ubiquitous images during the Symbolist period of the predatory female whose weapon is her irresistible and powerful erotic attractiveness. Furthermore, specific themes and metaphoric constructs associated with the negative aspect of the mythic feminine will be emphasised, for example, the feminine as a personification of nature (animal and instinctual), of matter, of death and evil. The visual metaphors employed to express these ideas are, on the whole, less traditional than those relating to the *femme fatale* motif and are for the most part, particular to Symbolist imagery. These metaphoric images display an inventiveness and originality which mark them as unique products of the Symbolist era. This is the case most notably in the works of Rops. It will be argued that these metaphoric constructs of the negative feminine can be interpreted in the light of Idealist thinking, specifically with regard to the Idealist notion of Matter, which will be outlined in this chapter. By way of conclusion, a discussion will be presented on the problem of the relationship between the erotic

and death and the notion of transcendence which is implicit in many of the images dealing with the negative feminine.

I

The Femme Fatale

The provocative theme of the *femme fatale* is undoubtedly one of the most pervasive in the literature and art of the Symbolist period. It is a highly complex image which personifies many of the aesthetic, moral and ideological concerns of the *fin-de-siècle* which will be examined in this chapter.

The image of the fatal woman is, of course, not confined to the art of the late nineteenth century, but is rather a fundamental theme that has appeared frequently in the creative products of all cultures through the centuries. The Judao-Christian legends of Eve, Lilith, Judith and Salome share a kinship with their classical counterparts such as the Medusa, the Chimera and Lamia, the Maenads, the Sirens and Circe as well as the Nordic Hel and Freya and the Egyptian Cleopatra.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the theme of the fatal woman has occupied a prominent position in the literature of the West from the early Arthurian cycles (Morgana le Fey) through the Renaissance (Alcinas, Erminias) to the nineteenth century where the theme achieved a new level of prominence in especially the novels of early nineteenth-century authors, most particularly Flaubert's *Salammbô*, Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen* and Gautier's *Le Roi Candaule* and *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* (1845).

The central characteristic of the fatal female type is her dangerous eroticism. In other words, the *femme fatale* is

¹⁰⁹ Vide Bimer, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

responsible for the seduction leading to death of her victims. As Praz has noted, the *femme fatale*, '... like the praying mantis, kills the male whom she loves... [she] stands in the same relation to him as do the female spider, the praying mantis, etc., to their respective males: sexual cannibalism is her monopoly'.¹¹⁰ The *femme fatale* commands and destroys through sexual love. Péladan noted the omnipotence of the feminine in her ability to manipulate the forces of desire:

Cette conception apothéotique de l'amour sexuel, est tellement dans les livres et les esprits, que rien qu'à se laisser décrire, une femme est toute-puissante sur l'individu comme un César sur Rome... Passive, absolu, injuste, la femme n'admire la grandeur que par espoir d'en obtenir le sacrifice. Elle aime les chastes pour les corrompre; les forts pour les asservir; les indépendants pour les avilir. Idole comme Shiva, son culte c'est l'hécatombe. Cléopâtre a fui, à Actium, afin de voir son amant, abandonner le combat et l'empire du monde pour suivre sa galère. Toutes les femmes, dans la mesure de leur destinée, essayent la fuite de Cléopâtre, et celui qui ne leur fait pas litière de tout, est un monstre.¹¹¹

The legend that Cleopatra murdered her lovers after spending the night with them made her an ideal incarnation of the erotic cruelty of the *femme fatale* type especially during the early nineteenth century. Gautier observed the significance of this savage sexuality incarnate in the figure of Cleopatra in his *Mademoiselle de Maupin*:

Ah! Cléopâtre, je comprends maintenant pourquoi tu faisais tuer, le matin, l'amant avec qui tu avais passé la nuit. Sublime cruauté, pour qui, autrefois, je n'avais pas assez d'imprécations! Grande voluptueuse, comme tu connaissais la nature humain, et qu'il y a de profondeur dans cette barbarie!¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, translated by Angus Davidson, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, pp. 215-216.

¹¹¹ Joseph Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême*, reprinted Chamuel, Paris, 1896 in Editions Slatkine, Geneva, 1979, p. 122.

¹¹² Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, cited in Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

Another work which had a significant impact on the *fin-de-siècle*, especially with regard to the image of the feminine is Gustave Flaubert's *La Tentation de St. Antoine* which has been seen as one of the most important sources of inspiration for Symbolist art in France.¹¹³ The figure of the feminine temptress is central to this work where descriptions of Eastern, Grecian, Roman and Indian goddesses, including the figures of the Sphinx, Circe and the Queen of Sheba, plague the hermit. Many of these figures would become central to the iconography of the mythic feminine in *fin-de-siècle* art inspired directly or indirectly through Flaubert's work. The seductive charm of the fatal female, as well as the mystery of eroticism incarnate in her body, is a typical characteristic of this aspect of the negative feminine during the period. In this regard, Flaubert's Queen of Sheba exclaims:

All the women you ever met, from the girl at the crossroads singing under the lantern to the patrician high upon her litter, plucking rose petals, all the shapes half seen or imagined by your desire, ask for them every one! I am not a woman, but a world. My clothes need only fall away for you to discover in my person one continuous mystery.¹¹⁴

Another work which was to have a significant influence on the period as regards the theme of the *femme fatale* was Baudelaire's poem *The metamorphoses of a Vampire* from *Les Fleur du Mal*.¹¹⁵ The *femme fatale* theme of the seductive devouring female is cogently evoked in Baudelaire's poem in which the vivid, almost shocking imagery would later find a parallel in the works of

¹¹³ According to Bettina Polak, *Het Fin-de-Siècle in de Nederlandse Schilderkunst, De Symbolistische Beweging 1890-1900*, 'S-Gravenhage, Martinus Nijhoff, 1955, p. 23.

¹¹⁴ Gustave Flaubert *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, Translated by Kitty Mrosovsky, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1980, p. 89.

¹¹⁵ Bimer has noted the significant influence this poem had on the thinking of the Symbolist period regarding the theme of the *femme fatale*, *vide op. cit.*, p. 191.

Félicien Rops. Baudelaire's poem serves as a good example of the typical construction of the negative feminine which would be emulated during the *fin-de-siècle* and it is therefore appropriate to quote it in full:

This woman who, her mouth a strawberry red
 Writhed like a snake on embers, in her bed,
 Pressing her breasts against her steely busk,
 Uttered these phrases redolent of musk:
 - 'My lips are moist; and I, in bed, am skilled
 In teaching time-worn conscience to be stilled.
 I dry all tears on my triumphant breast
 And cause the old to laugh with childlike zest.
 For those who see me naked, I replace
 The moon, the sun, the stars and azure space!
 I am, dear adept, skilled in pleasures' charms,
 And - when I crush a man within my arms,
 Or give my blossom to his eager lust,
 Timid, licentious, delicate, robust;
 Upon my mattress, faint with ecstasy -
 The Angels, lost, would damn themselves for me!'

Thus she all marrow from my bones would drain,
 But when, relaxed, I turn to her again
 To clasp and kiss her lovingly, my eyes
 saw but a sac of pus and viscous thighs!
 Aghast I closed my eyes, frozen by fright,
 And when once more they opened to the light,
 No virile puppet lay beside me there,
 Endowed, so it had seemed, with blood; but bare,
 Creaking, confused, a skeleton's remains
 Squeaking aloud like breeze-blown weather vanes,
 Or like a sign-board, swaying to and fro,
 Which throughout the winter nights, the storm winds blow.

Commenting on the poem, George Ridge summarises some of the key elements which have here been associated with the negative feminine:

Charles Baudelaire casts modern man and woman in a graphic scene that is to obsess writers of the French Decadence. Modern man is shown as a weak decadent consumed by modern woman, who is a vampire or a *femme fatale*. Their love is a passionate death struggle in which the active female, like the spider, destroys the passive male. It is an ironical poem. In it man searches for beauty but finds ugliness, and he looks for love in a woman's arms only to confront destruction. The beautiful mannequin of his dreams,

his ideal woman, is actually a vampire who drains him of his energy, i.e., his life.¹¹⁵

The suggestion here that the yearning for the feminine is motivated by an unconscious fantasy which is confounded by and confused with woman in reality, upon whom this fantasy is projected, is an important aspect of the dilemma of the mythical feminine.

The vampirish nature of the *femme fatale* was a favoured construction of the motif and was popularised by Walter Pater during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This characteristic was seen to be personified in the image of the *Mona Lisa*. Regarding the *Mona Lisa*, Pater wrote:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world are come', and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies had passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have the power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the Middle Ages with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave... The fancy of perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa

¹¹⁵ George Ross Ridge, *The Hero in French Decadent Literature*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1962, p. 141. Cited in Bimer, *ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.¹¹⁷

The literature of the Symbolist period is filled with characters which personify the negative feminine. Prominent examples are, Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocus*, Remy de Gourmont's *Litanies du Rose* (1892), Elémir Bourges' *Le Crépuscule des dieux* (1884), Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Contes Cruels*, Maurice Maeterlinck's *Le Princesse Madelaine* (1889) and Joseph Péladan's *Le Vice Suprême*. It was, however, Barbey d'Aurevilly's collection of short stories, *Les Diaboliques* which was the most prominent articulation of the theme of the fatal female during the period. This was illustrated by Rops. Of the six women upon which each short story is centred in this anthology, d'Aurevilly wrote:

Quant aux femmes de ces histoires, pourquoi ne seraient-elles pas les *Diaboliques*? N'ont-elles pas assez de diabolisme en leur personne pour mériter ce doux nom? Diaboliques! il n'y en a pas une seule ici qui ne le soit à quelque degré. Il n'y en a pas une seule à qui on puisse dire sérieusement le mot de 'Mon ange!' sans exagérer. Comme le Diable, qui était un ange aussi, mais qui a culbité, - si elles sont des anges, c'est comme lui, - la tête en bas, le... (sic) reste en haut! Pas une ici qui soit pure, vertueuse, innocente. Monstres même à part, elles présentent un effectif de bons sentiments et de moralité bien peu considérable.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Walter Pater, 'Leonardo da Vinci', in *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, Harold Bloom ed. New York, New York American Library Inc., 1974, pp. 46-47. Cited in Bimer, *op. cit.*, p. 183. The *Mona Lisa* became a cultish figure during the latter half of the nineteenth century and figured in many of the writings and articles during the period, and served as a convenient projection for the many of the anxieties concerning the feminine during the *fin-de-siècle*. Vide Praz, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-256.

¹¹⁸ Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, 'Préface de la première Édition', *Les Diaboliques*, 1874. Reprinted in Editions Garnier Frères, Paris, 1963. In the same preface, d'Aurevilly notes the duality of the image woman and promises the reader a future edition of stories dealing with the positive feminine titled *les Célestes*. These were, however, never written.

Of the forerunners in the visual arts with regard to the theme of the *femme fatale* it was undoubtedly the work of Gustave Moreau which had a significant impact on the artists and writers of the period. Moreau's artistic career spanned several decades from the 1860s, when he exhibited at the official Salons, to the latter part of the 1890s. Moreau's *oeuvre* in general is a veritable catalogue of images and themes which would preoccupy the artists of the *fin-de-siècle*, including that of the androgyne but, most significantly the theme of the negative feminine. Despite the close thematic affinity between his art and that of the Symbolists, he stood apart from the Symbolist movement as such (refusing to exhibit at Péladan's Salons during the 1890's) and led a reclusive life in his home in Paris.¹¹⁹ Moreau's works like *Helen* (1881), *Eve*, (1880-1885) [Mathieu, 1976:181] *Helen on the Walls of Troy* (1885) [Mathieu, 1976:140], *Cleopatra* (1887) [Mathieu, 1976:170], and the series of works on the theme of Salome, the most significant being *The Apparition* (1876) [Fig. 14], show an almost obsessive fascination with this subject which are articulated in Moreau's inimitable style of rich textures and saturated colour.

During the period, however, the idea of the *femme fatale* was personified above all in the images of Salome and the Sphinx. Both figures were seen as ideal incarnations of the *femme fatale* specifically with regard to the erotic ambivalence of the symbol.

¹¹⁹ Vide Pierre Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau: with a catalogue of the finished paintings, watercolours and drawings*, translated from the French by James Emmeson, New York Graphic Society, Boston, 1976.

i) *Salome*

The legend of Salome fascinated the artists of the Symbolist period and was frequently depicted in their art. The most well known exploration of the theme was Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* originally written in French in 1891-2 and which was later to form the basis for Richard Strauss' epyphonous opera of 1905 based on the Hedwig Lachmann German translation.

Examples from the visual arts are Franz von Stuck's *Salome* (1906) [Delevoy, 1979:133], Aubrey Beardlsey's *The Dancer's Reward* (1894) [Delevoy, 1979:135] and Puvis de Chavanne's *The Beheading of John the Baptist* (1869) [Lucie-Smith, 1972:83]. Other typical examples include Lucien Levy-Dhurmer's *Salome Kissing the head of John the Baptist* (1896) [Fig. 4] and a contemporary transformation of the theme seen in Félicien Rops' *Modernité*. However, the most celebrated visual image that portrayed the theme of Salome was Gustave Moreau's *The Apparition* (1876) [Fig. 14]. In an early study on the work of Moreau, Ary Renan commented on the theme of the fatale feminine in Moreau's work, especially with reference to his treatment of Salome:

...Moreau vivant de longues années sous l'obsession de ce nom de femme, hanté par la vision d'un geste impitoyable, par l'horreur de ce sang de juste versé pour la grâce d'un être fatal et beau; car, ce qu'il demande, à l'amer récit de l'Évangile, c'est encore un monstre à peindre, un monstre femelle encore, dont la force réside à la fois dans sa beauté charnelle, dans la pratique d'artifices maudites, dans un malinité spontanée ou suggérée. La syrienne Salomé devient ainsi, par le désir qu'elle a conçu ou par la vengeance qu'elle sert, l'incarnation d'une harmonieuse et navrante énergie du Mal, l'ouvrière d'un de ces crimes démesurés qu'il appartient à l'art de magnifier.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Ary Renan, *Gustave Moreau*, Paris, ed. Gazette de Beaux-Arts, 1900, p. 62. Cited in Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

Huysmans' immortalised Moreau's treatment of this theme in this image for the Decadents in describing it in minute detail in Chapter V of *A Rebours*. Huysmans recognised that Salome was 'a figure with a haunting fascination for artists and poets'.¹²¹ Moreover, he clearly sees in Salome the incarnation of the lascivious, sexually dangerous female type embodied in the *femme fatale* motif during the *fin-de-siècle*. He writes in describing Moreau's image:

she was no longer the dancing girl who exhorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the moral and breaks the will of a king by the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly, the quivering of her thighs. She has become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the goddess of immortal hysteria. The accursed beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning like the Helen of ancient myth everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.¹²²

Furthermore, Huysmans describes her as the embodiment of the female force that destroys the male through her sexual charms, the central characteristic of the *femme fatale* during the Symbolist period:

Here she was, a true harlot, obedient to her passionate and cruel female temperament; here she came to life, more refined yet more savage, more hateful yet more exquisite than before: here she raised the sleeping senses of the male more powerfully, subjugated his will more surely with her charms - the charms of a great venereal flower, grown in a bed of sacrilege, reared in a hothouse of impiety.¹²³

¹²¹ Huysmans, *Against Nature*. A new translation by Robert Baldick, Penguin Modern Classics, Penguin, Great Britain, 1959, p. 65.

¹²² J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*. *ibid.*

¹²³ Huysmans, *ibid.*, p. 68.

Lévy-Dhurmer's *Salome Embracing the Severed Head of John the Baptist* is another striking rendering of the theme from the Symbolist period. Lévy-Dhurmer's work refers to the climatic final scene of Wilde's play in which the Princess's insatiable lust for the Baptist is consummated as she kisses the lips of his decapitated head. The ghastly aspect of this scene is punctuated in Wilde's play as the obsessed Salome utters her final words before being killed on Herod's command:

Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on my lips. Was it the taste of blood?...But perchance it is the taste of love...They say that love hath a bitter taste...But what of that? what (sic) of that? I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan.¹²⁴

Rops' satirical work *Modernité* alludes to the theme of Salome and depicts a fashionably dressed Parisian woman holding aloft a silver platter with the head of a bearded and spectacled gentleman. Behind the platter trails a ribbon with the word "Academie" inscribed on it.

ii) *The Sphinx*

The image of the Sphinx was to have as great an attraction for Symbolist artists as that of Salome. The image appears in amongst others, Toorop's *The Sphinx* (1892), Rops' *The Sphinx* (from the series *Les Diaboliques*), [Fig. 15] Redon's *The Red Sphinx* and Franz von Stuck's *The Sphinx* (1895) [Fig. 16] and *The Kiss of the Sphinx* (c. 1895) [Lucie-Smith, 1972:155].

¹²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Salomé*, London & Glasgow, Collins' Clear-Type Press, n.d., p. 252.

The Sphinx is a central symbol in the esoteric tradition. In its Grecian or Egyptian form it is usually a hybrid with qualities from both the human and animal worlds. Edouard Schuré in his work *The Great Initiates*, which had a profound impact on the Symbolists, devotes an entire chapter on the esoteric significance of the Sphinx. He writes of the ancient colossal female Sphinx of Gizeh near the Great Pyramid:

The Sphinx, that first creation of Egypt, became the latter's principle symbol, its distinctive mark...A human head emerges from a bull's body with lion's paws, and folds its eagle's wings at its sides. It is terrestrial Isis, a portrayal of the living unity of nature's kingdoms, for the ancient priesthoods knew and taught that in the great order of evolution, human nature emerges from animal nature. In this composite of bull, lion, eagle and man are also contained the elements of the microcosm and macrocosm; water, earth air and fire, the foundation of esoteric science.¹²⁵

In other words, the Sphinx is seen as the synthesis of contraries, a quaternity and an image of wholeness. These characteristics did not go unnoticed by Symbolist artists. Joseph Péladan endorsed this interpretation and expressed the idea that, from an occult point of view, the union of opposites revealed in the body of the sphinx prefigured the final union of opposites which man shall achieve in the form of the androgyne. Péladan articulates this view in the following:

Esotériquement il représente l'état initiale de l'homme qui est identique a son état final. Il lui enseigne le principe d'évolution et le secret de bonheur... et ce secret se déchiffre aisement par le mot amour qui consiste héraldiquement dans le rapprochement de la barbe et des seins, dans l'androgynisation passionnelle. Le Sphinx incarne le théologie complète avec la solution des origines et des finalités... Le Sphinx sourit à son devenir illimité, il a reconstitué son unité sexuelle étant homme et femme. Il sait qu'il reconstituera un jour

¹²⁵ Edouard Shuré, *The Great Initiates. A Study of the Secret History of Religions*, translated from the French by Gloria Raspberry, Harper and Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1961, p. 132.

son unité originelle, car il est homme et dieux, dans la mesure même de l'involution à l'évolution.¹²⁶

The influence of Egyptian culture in the nineteenth century was strengthened by the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt. Howe has noted the influence of Egyptian culture during the *fin-de-siècle* and notes especially how the image of the Sphinx became an important emblem of ancient Egypt's mysterious and occult aspects that appealed directly to the Idealist impulse in Symbolist culture:

The mute stones of ancient Egypt must fascinate any society marked by a consciousness of history and haunted by the dichotomy of the past and present; accordingly, this vanished civilisation fired the imagination of the general public, Egyptologists, occultists and artists throughout the nineteenth century. The *fin-de-siècle* saw a resurgence of occultism and a new wave of interest in the wisdom and silent hieratic art of Egypt, most clearly demonstrated by the obsessive use of the sphinx in Symbolist art.¹²⁷

Fernand Khnopff was one artist in particular whose art was directly informed by Egyptian motifs. Howe observes that: 'Khnopff's Egyptological studies are of fundamental importance for the development and understanding of his art and aesthetics'.¹²⁸ Moreover, the image of the sphinx is an ubiquitous motif in his art and occurs in for example, *Art or the Caresses* (1896) [Fig. 12], *La Sphinge* (1884) [Fig. 17], which was created as a frontispiece for Joséph Péladan's *Le Vice Suprême, Un Ange* (1889) [Fig. 3] and *l'Offrande*. The motif of the sphinx

¹²⁶ Joseph Péladan, *De l'Androgyne*, Paris, 1910, pp. 16-17. Quoted in Howe, *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*, U. M. I. Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982, p. 219. Péladan's important views on the androgyne and their influence in late nineteenth century non-realist aesthetics will be analysed in greater detail in chapter four.

¹²⁷ Jeffrey W. Howe, *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*. U.M.I. Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982, p. 38.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

in Khnopff's work undergoes a subtle and important stylistic declension from a traditional rendering of the theme in terms of standard Greco-Egyptian iconography to a more subtle suggestion of its essential characteristics which expresses a more specific significance that related to the problems particular to the late nineteenth century, especially with regard to the construction of the feminine during that period. An important example of the latter form is to be found in his *Art or the Caresses*. This work is also stylistically related to his *Un Ange* with which it shares many similarities. One of the important associations belonging to this work is that between woman and the animal and the bestial which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Moreover, the image of the sphinx in Symbolist art is also closely aligned to the sphinx in Grecian mythology...the beast that posed the riddle: 'what creature walks with four legs in the morning, with two in the afternoon and with three in the evening?' Of course the answer is man. Failure to answer correctly meant instant death. It took Oedipus to solve the riddle after which the Sphinx flung herself into the abyss. A traditional representation of this episode can be seen in Gustave Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* [Mathieu, 1976:256]. It was this characteristic of the Sphinx that would have appealed to the Symbolists' sensibilities: that it was a female figure, that it was a creature of great enigma and that it was a potential source of death - qualities all central to the *femme fatale* motif. The sense of malevolence of the sphinx as a creature of the flesh and destruction and the fear of her ability to make men impotent through her powers is vividly expressed in a passage from Edouard Schuré's *L'Ange et la Sphinge* (1897):

From the sphinx's leonine body there rose, in shameless arrogance, a woman's torso, morbidly white. The opulent curving breasts were offering their blood red fruits. The haughty, massive head was that of a

Roman empress, commanding of profile, with a powerful and sensual fold beneath the chin, a helmet of tawny hair coiling around the brow. The rosy blood, as it began to flow through the alabaster flesh, caused her skin to quiver, and the golden thicket of her neck to stand on end. With dread, I felt the animal within me encaptivated by the sphinx, as though some withering monster were drinking at my veins in order to suck life into its own flesh.¹²⁹

Franz von Stuck's *The Kiss of the Sphinx* (1895) expresses vividly the aspect of the sphinx as seducer. Von Stuck's image depicts the sphinx as a hybrid figure with a leonine lower body and huge paws for hands while the upper torso and head is that of a young woman with full breasts and long hair.¹³⁰ This figure crouches on a ledge and grasps a naked male figure which kneels below her. The two figures are in a deeply passionate embrace. The helpless male figure is completely dominated by the sexually aggressive female sphinx as she draws him towards her in her powerful grasp.

Rops' *The Sphinx*, the frontispiece for d'Aurevilly's *Les Diaboliques*, represents a similar figure of the sphinx with the head and breast of a woman and the body and paws of a lion. Rops' image depicts further a smaller voluptuous female figure stretched out on the back of the figure of the sphinx with her arms around the creatures's neck. Between the two pointed wings

¹²⁹ Edouard Schuré, *L'Ange et la Spninge*, Paris, Perrin, 1897, p. 134. Quoted in Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900*, translated by Derek Coltman, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1981, p. 130.

¹³⁰ The hybrid was a common device used in Symbolist imagery. The naturally impossible combination of naturalistic elements of the hybrid form emphasises the imaginary quality of the image and can be seen to refer directly to the realm of the imagination and the subjective. It is also a common device in mythology. Other good examples of this device are Klimpt's spermatomorphic feminine forms in his *The Sirens* and the figures in Redon's *Fantastic Monster* and *Then there appears a Fantastic Being* which similarly combines features from the orders of the human and the animal.

stretched behind the sphinx is seated a thin figure with horns representing the Devil. The image suggests the themes of sensualism and evil which are an important aspect of the negative feminine during the Symbolist period.

One of the important aspects of the image of the sphinx is the combination of the human and the animal, or more specifically, the feminine and the animal, as has been noted in the work of von Stuck, Khnopff and Rops. This association suggests a relationship between the feminine and nature. The following section will explore this aspect of the feminine in Symbolist art which will be interpreted as a metaphoric construct of matter and Materialism.

II

Metaphoric Constructs of the Negative Feminine

i) The Feminine as representation of the Animal, Nature, and the Material

As indicated in the previous section, the important characteristic of the Sphinx in Symbolist imagery was the association between woman and animal. The present section will focus on this issue in relation to Khnopff's *Un Ange*. Khnopff's image shows two figures in a nocturnal setting. The erect hieratic standing figure dressed in armour contrasts with the languid supine tiger-female hybrid. The contrast in dress, pose and expression highlights the duality between the two figures and suggests a possible meaning of the image which seems to refer to the relationship between opposites. The knight-angel is constructed in the visual syntax of the androgyne - one of the central images in Symbolist culture representing the Ideal, the

intellectual construct which personifies the interior realm of the imagination, the subjective and the spiritual. On the other hand, the feline-woman, with her voluptuous and sensual expression in the face and pose would suggest an association with the realm of the sensual and material. She seems the personification of physical pleasure.¹³¹

The association between the sensuality of the feminine and that of the cat is also to be found in Baudelaire's poetry. In poem XXXIV of *Les Fleurs du Mal* the ambivalence between the sensual pleasure of the cat's body, and the potentially dangerous nature of this sensuality, is equated with the feminine:

Then as my fingers stroke at leisure
Your head and resilient back,
And, as my hand, quite drunk with pleasure,
strokes that electric track,

I see my beloved's ghost. Her glance
Like yours, my pet, my sweet,
Is chill and piercing like a lance,

And, from head to feet,
A perfume, dangerous, subtle, warm
Pervades her dusky form.

The association between woman and cat can be abstracted to suggest the association between woman and the animal generally. This theriomorphic conception of the feminine was common in

¹³¹ The feline-woman is another construct of the sphinx motif. It may be worth noting that the sphinx was regarded as an emblem of pleasure. Andrea Alciati stated in his *Emblemata cum Commentariis* (1621) that the sphinx signifies 'the pleasure of the body, attractive indeed at first sight, but very bitter and sad after you have tasted it'. Quoted in Jung *Symbols of Transformation*, in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, volume 5, Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler eds.), Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1956, p. 179. The detailed discussion of this image will be undertaken in the section of this paper dealing with the androgyne where the complex relationship between the androgyne and the animal, depicted here, will be better understood in the context of an understanding of the significance of the androgyne during the period.

Symbolist culture and the association between woman and animal implied, by extension, the association between woman and nature. This association between woman and nature and the animal is particularly evident in the writings of Baudelaire. As already indicated, Baudelaire had an enormous influence on the Symbolists, and his ideas concerning the feminine articulated clearly the ambiguity and paradox associated with the experience of the feminine in Symbolist culture especially regarding the simultaneous execration and spiritualisation of the feminine. In particular, the association between woman and the animal, or nature, is a conspicuous formulation in his construction of the feminine and is evident in the following passage where he writes:

La femme est le contraire du Dandy.
 Donc elle doit faire horreur.
 La femme a faim et elle veut manger. Soif, et elle
 veut boire.
 Elle est en rut et elle veut être foutu.
 Le beau mérite!
 La femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire le contraire du
 Dandy.¹³²

¹³² Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux intimes*, 'Mon coeur mis à nu' III. Quoted in *Oeuvres Complètes*, volume I, Gallimard, Paris, 1975, p. 677.

Similar views are expressed in 'La Femme Sauvage et la Petite Maîtresse', in *Petits Poèmes en Prose*:

Considérons bien, je vous prie, cette solide cage de fer derrière laquelle s'agite, hurlant comme un damné, secouant les barreaux comme un orang-outang exaspéré par l'exil, imitant, dans la perfection, tantôt les bonds circulaires du tigre, tantôt les dandinements stupides de l'ours blanc, ce monstre poilu dont la forme imite assez vaguement la vôtre.

Ce monstre est un de ces animaux qu'on s'appelle généralement "mon ange" c'est à dire une femme.

Charles Baudelaire, *Petites Poèmes en Prose* Quoted in *Oeuvres complètes* *ibid.*, p. 289. And furthermore, in 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne' he writes:

[La femme]...représente bien la sauvagerie dans la civilisation. Elle a sa beauté qui lui vient du Mal, toujours dénuée de spiritualité, mais quelquefois teintée d'une fatigue qui joue la mélancholie. Elle porte le regard à l'horizon, comme la bête de proie.

Oeuvres Complètes, *ibid.*, volume II, p. 721.

Marie-Anne Barbéris remarks with regard to Baudelaire's equation between woman and the animal the following:

Similar sentiments are expressed in Maupassant's novella *Fou* which clearly associates woman with the lower instincts, nature and the animal. The principle character of the novel states the following with regard to the woman he loves:

As for her, the woman in all this, the creature of the body, I hate her, I despise her, I execrate her, I have always hated, despised and execrated her; for she is treacherous, bestial, loathsome, impure: she is the woman of perdition, the sensual and devious animal in whom no soul is, through whom no thought ever flows like a free and vivifying breeze: she is the human animal.¹³³

In the context of Symbolist aesthetics the execration of the feminine in this regard is perhaps not surprising, in so far as the feminine was seen, on the one hand, to be equated with nature and the (erotic) instincts in Symbolist thought generally. Péladan, for example, wrote, 'La femme correspond à l'instinct sexuel, comme l'aliment à l'instinct nutritif...'¹³⁴ The 'anti-feminine' attitude of the Symbolists can be understood to be another expression of their 'anti-naturalism', which personified their desperate desire to flee from nature, both human nature and natural landscape and the world of sensuous experience, into an

Mortelle et destructrice, liée aux forces élémentaires (la lune la nuit la morte)...[la femme]...provoque le désir mais ne partage pas, elle est aimée mais n'aime pas, elle reçoit sans donner ni se donner...Le différence entre l'homme et la femme n'est pas seulement sexuelle: elle est différence de nature, ou pour mieux dire d'espèce. Tandis que l'homme appartient à l'humanité, la femme relève de l'animalité:...la vérité de la femme, c'est qu'elle est une bête, un chat...

Marie-Anne Barbéris, *Les Fleurs du Mal de Charles Baudelaire*, Éditions Pédagogie Moderne, Paris, 1980, p. 84.

¹³³ Maupassant, *Contes et Nouvelles*, volume 2, p. 785. Quoted in Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900*. Translated by Derek Coltman, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 128.

¹³⁴ Péladan, *La Décadence Latine, Éthopée II Curieuse*, Paris, Librairie de la Presse 1886, p. 71. Reprinted by Slatkine, Geneva, 1979.

interior realm of subjective experience. In other words, it is the sensual, erotic ('animal') and natural (instinctual) side of the feminine from which the Symbolists sought to escape in so far as it represented the realm of the material to which they were intrinsically opposed. Péladan was quite direct with regard to this point and wrote: 'La femme... c'est la chair: et la chair, pour les races latines déjà énerchées et pour l'homme de pensée, c'est l'ennemi'.¹³⁵ The images discussed in the previous section could well be interpreted in the light of the observations presented here.

The equation: woman equals animal equals nature could be extrapolated to include the idea that woman equals matter, and Materialism as such - which was often expressed during the period and was a logical inference in the light of their anti-naturalist and anti-materialist position. It is possible to suggest that the anti-feminine aspect in Symbolist art can be seen as a symbolic reference to this fundamental anti-materialist impulse in their culture.¹³⁶ This constitutes another fundamental paradox in Symbolist culture where matter (and hence the feminine) is simultaneously execrated and celebrated - execrated as an *end in itself* in so far as it obscures knowledge of the spiritual order of reality, but celebrated as a *means* by which this dimension can be attained (*cf.* the Introduction regarding the discussion on the relationship between the material object and the symbol.) This will be discussed further in the section below regarding the relationship between the motif of the negative feminine and Idealism.

¹³⁵ Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

¹³⁶ For a discussion of the anti-*physis* impulse in Baudelaire, *vide* Cassou-Yager, *op. cit.*, p. 58 *et seq.*, and F. W. Leaky, *Baudelaire and Nature*. Manchester University Press, Manchester University, Manchester, 1969, pp. 127-150.

ii) *The Feminine as the embodiment of the Satanic and Evil.*

A further characteristic of the representation of the feminine during the *fin-de-siècle* which should be considered, in relation to the negative aspects of the mythic feminine, is the association between woman and the Devil or Satan. This was a particular feature of the representation of the feminine in non-Realist art which was a function of the general preoccupation with the Satanic during the Symbolist epoch.

Satanism, and a resurgence of interest in evil, was one of the central impulses of the Decadent era. Péladan viewed the 'aesthetic of evil', current during the period, as the supreme vice:

L'esthétique du mal, ce vice surnaturel dont l'apparition sonne le glas des décadences... [est]... ce que l'Eglise appelle l'Esprit de Malice. Qu'on nie Satan! La Sorcellerie a toujours des sorciers... des esprits supérieurs qui n'ont pas besoin de grimoire, leur pensée était une page écrite par l'enfer, pour l'enfer. Au lieu du chevreau, ils ont tué en eux l'âme bonne et vont au sabbat du Verbe. Ils s'assambent pour profaner et souiller l'Idée...Raisonner, justifier, héroïser le mal, en établir le rituel, en démontrer l'excellence, est-ce pas pis que le commettre? - Adorer le démon ou aimer le mal: terme abstrat ou concret du fait identique. Il y a de l'aveuglement dans la satisfaction de l'instinct, et de la démente dans la perpétration du méfait, mais concevoir et théoriser exigent une opération calme de l'esprit, qui est le Vice suprême.¹³⁷

Satanism, moreover, represented a counter-position to the normative values of the ordered bourgeois society against which the non-Realists reacted and was, furthermore, an expression of the moral ambivalence of 'Good' and 'Evil' which characterised

¹³⁷ Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême, op. cit.*, p. 210.

the period. This is succinctly expressed by Huysmans, author of *Là-Bas*, who, after his conversion to Catholicism, wrote, 'It was through a glimpse of the supernatural of evil that I first obtained insight into the supernatural of good. The one derived from the other'.¹³⁸

The anxiety felt towards the sense of the omnipresence of evil experienced during the period is captured in the fourth stanza of the first poem of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 'Au Lecteur':

C'est le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent!
 Aux objets répugnant nous trouvons des appas;
 Chaque jour vers l'Enfer nous descendons d'un pas,
 Sans horreur, à travers des ténèbres qui puent.

Péladan made a perceptive analysis of the causes of this attraction towards evil and saw it as one of many symptoms of a civilisation in decline. Péladan wrote:

L'étude passionnelle des décadences trouve un peu près toujours, un déterminisme illogique, irrationnel absurde aux phénomènes psychiques. A cette heure des histoires où une civilisation finit, le grand fait est un état nauséeux de l'âme et dans les hautes classes surtout une lassitude d'exister. Alors, sciemment, délibérément, on gâche sa vie, on émiette son intelligence, on aime le mal pour le mal, on le fait 'pour le plaisir' et jusqu'à soi-même. Car de la décomposition générale des idées et des concepts, il résulte pour l'individu sans haut vouloir et qui ne sait pas réagir contre le courant de l'époque, un phénomène formidable d'envoûtement.¹³⁹

Moreover, Satanism became the subject of many occult, literary and artistic works of the period. Works by Jean Lorrain (for example, *Un Démoniaque* (1883)) and Anatole Baju (for example, the poem *Necrolâtre*, (1886)) as well as Albert Aurier's *Le Magnetiseur*

¹³⁸ Huysmans, quoted in Lucie-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹³⁹ Joséph Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

(1886), Robert de Montesquieu's *Chauves-Souris* (1893) and Edouard Dujardin's *Les Hantisses* (1886) exploited the theme of the Satanic in a literary context.¹⁴⁰ The taste for black magic and the dark forces of the occult were popularised in quasi-scientific works such as Sinistrari d'Ameno's *De la Démonialité et des animaux - Incubes et Succubes*, which expressed a belief in the possibility of sexual commerce between demons and humans. D'Ameno's work was instrumental in drawing attention to the phenomena of vampirism, black masses, and bewitching.¹⁴¹ These themes were also explored in two of the most influential works on the subject of the Satanic during the period, namely J.-K. Huysmans' novel *Là-Bas* (1891) and Jules Bois' work *Le Satanisme et la Magie* (1895).¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Vide Alain Mercier *Les Sources Esotériques et Occultes de la Poésie Symboliste (1870-1914)*. Volume I, 'Le Symbolisme Français', Editions A.-G. Nizet, Paris, 1969, p. 241, et seq.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² On the subject of the satanic and the occult, specifically with regard to the work of Huysmans, see J. Bricaud, *J.-K. Huysmans et le satanisme*, Paris, Charcornac, 1913 and J. Bricaud, *Huysmans occultiste et magicien*, Paris, Chacornac, 1913 as well as R. Schwaebélé *Le Satanisme flagellé: Satanistes contemporaines, incubat, succubat, sadisme et satanisme*, Paris R. Dutiare, 1912. (from Praz, note 33 and 41 p. 409, 410.)

Significantly, Péladan included a chapter on demonality in his novel, *Le Vice Suprême* in which he refers to Sinistrari's work. Péladan demonstrates an acute psychological understanding of the phenomenon of demon possession in interpreting it not in a literal sense, but figuratively, as an expression of 'obsession' and a function of the imagination. Péladan writes:

En rendant à l'humaine Malice ce que l'on attribuait au Malin, la démonialité est une oeuvre de chair qui consiste à s'exalter l'imagination, en fixant son désir sur un être mort absent ou inexistant.

Si une femme s'hypnotise la pensée sur Alcibiade, la sensation qui en résulte constitue ce que le Moyen Age appelait commerce avec un démon incubé; si un artiste exalte son désir sur Cléopâtre ou Rosalinde, cette femme évoquée sera le succube qui abusera de lui. Le péché peut s'aggraver encore si une femme a un désir succube, un homme un désir incubé.

Joséph Péladan *Le Vice Suprême*, op. cit., p. 91.

In the visual arts, the theme of Evil and death incarnate in female beauty was a favoured theme in the works of Gustave Moreau. In his own commentary in his work, *The Chimeras* (1884) Moreau wrote the following:

This Isle of Fantastic Dreams encloses all the forms that passion, caprice and fancy take in women. Woman, in her primal essence, an unthinking creature, mad on mystery and the unknown, smitten with evil in the form of perverse and diabolical seduction. Dreams of children, dreams of the senses, monstrous and melancholy dreams, dreams conveying spirit and soul into the vague inane of space, into the mystery of darkness. Everything must feel the influence of the seven capital sins, everything is to be found in this satanic precinct, in this circle of vices and guilty ardours, from the seed still apparently innocent to the monstrous and fatal flowers of the abyss. Here are processions of accursed queens just coming away from the serpent of spellbinding sermons; here are women whose souls has gone from them, waiting by the wayside for the lascivious goat to come by, the goat mounted by lust that will be worshipped as it passes...¹⁴³

Rops' *Les Diables Froids* [Fig. 18] and Otto Greiner's *The Devil showing Woman to the People* [Lucie-Smith, 1972:156] are further examples of the association between the feminine and the Devil in the visual arts of the period. This equation between woman and the Devil, moreover, was another great Baudelerian theme adopted by the Symbolists. In Baudelaire's thinking, the realm of matter, of nature and the animal as well as woman, which are all synonymous, are part of the realm of Satan:

Il y a dans tout homme, à toute heure, deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan. L'invocation à Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un désir de monter en grade; celle de Satan, ou animalité, est une joie de descendre. C'est à cette dernière que doivent être rapportés les amours pour

¹⁴³ Gustave Moreau, Commentary dated November 1897. Quoted in full in catalogue preface by Robert de Montesquiou to the 1906 Moreau exhibition in Paris, pp. 8-9. Cited in Pierre Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, New York Graphics Society, Boston, 1976, p. 159.

les femmes et les conversations intimes avec les animaux, chiens, chats, etc.
 Les Joies qui dérivent de ces deux amours sont adaptées à la nature de ces deux amours.¹⁴⁴

Moreover, the idea that woman was the handmaiden or bondswoman of the Devil was a popular sentiment during the period. This idea was favoured by Péladan who celebrated Rops' work which was given over to numerous depictions of the feminine as an ally of the satanic. Péladan wrote:

And like a subtler master, Rops immediately understood that today the possessed are the atheists and the positivists and that his [Satan's] fiend in the category of morality, was woman; and he formulated this admirable synthesis:...Man possessed by woman, Woman possessed by the Devil.¹⁴⁵

Indeed one of the period's catchphrases was Péladan's slogan: 'Man puppet of woman, woman puppet of the devil'.¹⁴⁶ The image of woman as a manipulator of men was explored on several occasions in the work of Rops. He created at least three versions of the image *La Dame et le Pantin* (1877) [Fig. 19] The earliest,

¹⁴⁴ Charles Baudelaire, 'Mon coeur mis à nu' XI, *Journaux intimes*. Quoted in *Oeuvres Complètes*. Volume I, Gallimard, Paris, 1975, p. 683. This basic polarity towards the spiritual and the material implicit in these lines of Baudelaire is a characteristic of the dualism that pervaded non-realist thought especially with regard to the feminine as will be seen especially in the context of Baudelaire's attitude towards the feminine. Baudelaire also suggested that woman's beauty is the disguise of the devil: 'L'éternelle Vénus (caprice, hystérie, fantaisie) est un des formes séduisantes du Diable'. *ibid.*, XXVI, p. 693.

¹⁴⁵ Joséph Péladan, 'Les Maîtres contemporains: Félicien Rops, I^{ère} étude, *La Jeune Belgique*, 1885, p. 15. Quoted in Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France. Joséph Péladan and the Salons de la Rose+Croix*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1968, p. 58. This theme seems to have been revived from the literature of the late eighteenth century and in particular works such as Cazotte's *Le Diable amoureux* (1772) and Mathew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). The same theme is present in an early work of Flaubert *Rêve d'enfer* (1837), where the love of Julietta for Arthur is described as', [un] amour déchirant, entier, satanique. C'était bien un amour inspiré par l'enfer'. Cited in Praz *op. cit.*, p. 205.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

La Dame au pantin et l'éventail, dated 1873 [Fig. 20], shows a lady in a low-cut dress with bustle and flounces, leaning her right elbow on a table and gazing at a jumping-jack held by her left hand to the level of her face. The second version, dated 1877, of *La Dame et le pantin* plays on the allegorical themes peculiar to the subject. The rain of coins which falls from the puppet's body refers both to a protector's money and to the legend of Danae, while the goat head, the satyr and the frieze, which shows representatives of various human activities as puppets on strings, reaffirm the abjectness of all men.¹⁴⁷

With specific regard to the association between woman and Satan, Rops created an entire series of images titled *Les Sataniques* (The Devil Possessed) which Huysmans annotated, in his celebrated anthology *Certains*. Recourse will be taken, in the present discussion, to Huysmans' observations on Rops' works which provide useful insights regarding the attitudes of intellectuals of the time on the subject of the Satanic and the feminine.

Rops' *Les Sataniques* constitutes a suite on the theme of the satanic alliance between woman and the Devil. The first plate, *Satan semant l'ivraie* [Fig. 21], depicts a gigantic sower striding over the rooftops of Paris at night. The tall, thin figure of Satan is dressed in peasant costume and, under a wide brimmed hat, the hideous, grimacing and emaciated face of the Devil with sunken eyes peers over the city. In his one hand, Satan holds up his apron filled with tiny female figures and with the other, he tosses handfuls of these female 'seeds' over the sleeping city. Huysmans observes with a certain irony:

En scrutinant l'horrible face, l'on peut discerner la jubilation froide et décidée du Diable qui sait de

¹⁴⁷ Vide Edith Hoffmann, 'Rops: Peintre de la femme moderne' in *Burlington Magazine*, no. 974, volume 126, May 1984, p. 262.

quelles vertus infâmes sont douées les larves qui'il essaime. Il sait aussi que la récolte est sûre et ses hideuses lèvres susurrent des Rogitations à rebours, invitent railleusement son inerte Rival à bénir ces maux de la terre, à consacrer la formidable moisson de crimes que ce grain prépare!¹⁴⁸

The suggestion, in this image, that Satan propagates evil and vice through the feminine recurs in Péladan's novel *Curieuse* and is one of the essential leitmotifs which characterises this aspect of the negative feminine during the *fin-de-siècle*. The second *Satanique* begins a sequence which narrates the abduction of woman by the Devil and the ensuing concupiscence between them. The work titled *L'Enlèvement* [Fig. 22] depicts a voluptuous naked figure carried on the back of the Devil through space en route to the underworld. In *L'Idole* [Fig. 23] a woman wearing slippers only is seen copulating with a priapic satanic Herm. The phallic herm is the centre of a semi-circular altar surrounded on each side by enormous theriomorphic phalli with breasts and goat's legs. Below the altar to the right, an elephant is depicted stimulating itself with its trunk. The fervid carnality of the woman in league with the devil, suggested in this image, is a shocking and vivid evocation of debauched eroticism which was a particular characteristic of the negative feminine during the *fin-de-siècle*. Huysmans noted well the character of this image in his commentary on these works:

Cette figure est vraiment magnifique; jamais la violence de la chair n'était ainsi sortit d'une oeuvre; jamais expression d'infini, d'extase, n'avait ainsi décomposé, en la sublimant, une face. Il y a d'une Thérèse diabolique, d'une sainte satanisée, en prière, dans cette créature accouplée, attendant la minute suprême qui se changera en une inoubliable déception, car tous les documents l'affirment, la femme qui fait paction avec le Diable, éprouve, au moment final, l'indicible horreur d'un jet de glace et

¹⁴⁸ J.-K. Huysmans, *Certains*, essay on Rops printed in Jean-François Bory *L'oeuvre Graphique Complète, Félicien Rops, Arthur Hubschmid*, Paris, 1977, p. 23 et seq.

.. tombe aussitôt, dans une inexprimable fatigue, dans un épuisement intense.¹⁴⁹

In *Le Sacrifice* [Fig. 24], Rops evokes a similar situation. A naked female lies on an altar, her head thrown back. Her face, with closed eyes and mouth half open reveals her state of erotic ecstasy. Above her levitates a curious figure with its back, resembling an animal's skull, turned towards the viewer, Around the head of this satanic figure of death hovers a thin halo and a crescent moon. From the loins of this Satan emerges a large phallus which twists around its legs before plunging into the woman's vagina. Two putti with skulls instead of heads hover around this scene. On the front of the altar, another hybrid figure is depicted in bas relief with a skeletal torso and fleshy, voluptuous hips, buttocks and legs plunging a bone into its genitals. The conflation of flesh and skeleton in these motifs is emblematic of the theme of eroticism and death which frequently occurs in Rops' work, which will be examined in greater detail below. In the present work it is the woman's eroticism (and death) which appears to be the sacrament of the sacrifice. Huysmans noted with regard to this image:

C'est affreux et grandiose, d'un symbolisme aigu de Luxure échouée dans la mort, de Possession désespérément voulue et, comme tout souhait qui se réalise, aussitôt expiée.¹⁵⁰

The final plate, *Le Calvaire* [Fig. 25], is the climax of this series and is a startling image of eroticism and death, it is also obscenely blasphemous. An ithyphalic figure of Satan is nailed to a cross in the form of the Greek Tau. Satan is a bestial figure with goat legs that end in hands which throttle a voluptuous woman at the base of the cross. The ambivalent

¹⁴⁹ Huysmans, *ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵⁰ Huysmans, *ibid.*, p. 25.

expression on the woman's face blurs the distinction between the pain and the ecstasy of her death. Huysmans noted:

La fiction dérisoire de cette scène, le sacrilège de cette croix devenue un instrument de joie, le stupre de cette Madeleine en extase devant la nudité de ce Christ, à la verge dure, toute cette Passion utérine qu'éclaire une rangée de cierges... sont véritablement démoniaques, véritablement issus de ces anciens sabbats qui, s'ils n'existent plus maintenant à l'éclat complet et réel, n'en sont pas moins célébrés à certains instants encore, dans l'âme putréfiée de chacun de nous.¹⁵¹

Huysmans concluded his article on Rops' work in celebrating Rops' original and contemporary construction of the feminine as an image of great ambivalence. Further he articulated a view, current during the late nineteenth century, regarding the relationship between the feminine and evil:

Il ne s'est pas borné, ainsi que ses prédécesseurs, à rendre les attitudes passionnelles des corps, mais il a fait jaillir des chairs en ignition, les douleurs des âmes fébricitantes et les joies des esprits faussés; il a peint l'extase démoniaque comme d'autres ont peint les élans mystiques. Loin du siècle, dans un temps où l'art matérialiste ne voit plus que des hystériques mangées par leur ovaires ou des nymphomanes dont le cerveau bat dans les régions du ventre, il a célébré, non la femme contemporaine, non la Parisienne, dont les grâces minaudières et les parures interlopes échappaient à ses apertises, mais la Femme essentielle et hors des temps, la Bête vénéneuses et nue, la mercenaire des Ténébres, la serve absolue du diable... Il a, en un mot, célébré ce spiritualisme de la Luxure qu'est le Satanisme, peint, en d'imperfectibles pages, le surnaturel de la perversité, l'au-delà du Mal.¹⁵²

It may be worth noting that for the Decadents, as for William Blake earlier in the century, the Devil represented freedom from, and opposition to the restraints and controls placed on man by the dogma and orthodoxy of the church and the inflexibility of

¹⁵¹ Huysmans, *ibid.*, p. 25-26.

¹⁵² Huysmans, *ibid.*, p. 29.

the social norms imposed in an ordered bourgeois society: it was a sign of spiritual, moral and social anarchy which was an intrinsic part of the Decadent spirit among Symbolist artists which has been stressed in the Introduction. Hence their addiction to blasphemy, diabolism as well as to eroticism and death.¹⁵³ Bimer reinforces this view and suggests that the image of the negative feminine, particularly the *femme fatale*, served as an ideological instrument in the social and aesthetic programme of the Symbolists:

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the modern 'Decadent' woman began to infiltrate literature and the visual arts to a greater extent than before. Here, a fictitious yet menacing female energy was unleashed which threaded itself through the fabric of the counter-culture of European society. Ironically, the Symbolists and the Decadents, whose views incorporated a dislike for traditional religion, perpetuated the old myths and religious leanings of the church and their anti-woman outlook. The modern woman became the 'Decadent' woman: the new Eve, the new Salome, the new *femme fatale*, the old-new symbol of moral depravity and spiritual anarchy.¹⁵⁴

iii) The Feminine as the Embodiment of Death

A final issue which should be considered is the association between woman and death. Gustave Moreau's work is particularly noted for this type of association especially in the image of the malevolent, destructive female. It is also evident in the poetic evocation of the association between the feminine and death as in for example his *The Young Man and Death* where the image of death is a gently floating feminine form with closed eyes behind the standing youth. Furthermore, the Sphinx, as we have already suggested, was an image which implied destruction and death.

¹⁵³ Vide Peter Webb, *The Erotic Arts*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1983, pp. 179-180.

¹⁵⁴ Bimer, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

There is an overt association between death and the image of Salome whose driving demonic passion can only be consummated with the severed head of John the Baptist. A conventional association between the image of the feminine and death can be seen in for example Calcs Schwabe's *Death and the Gravedigger* [Julian, 1971, plate 197] where death is personified in female form. Redon's *Death: I am the one that will make a serious Woman of you, let us Embrace* (1890) [Fig. 26] clarifies this association further as does his *Green Death* (c.1905-1906) [Lucie-Smith, 1972:79] showing a female form spinning out of a coiled vortex. The association between death and the feminine is further suggested in Max Klinger's *Dead Mother* (1885) [Delevoy, 1979:136], Gauguin's *Madame La Mort* (1891) [Delevoy, 1979:137] and Alfred Kubin's *The Bride Of Death* (c. 1900) [Fig. 11].

However, it is perhaps in Rops' work that the association between woman and death is particularly overt. This association between woman and death undergoes a variety of permutations in the images of Rops and is especially evident in works which resort to the traditional image of death, namely, the skeleton. One of the characteristic themes expressed in Rops' works is the association between feminine seduction and death. It has already been observed that this is the archetypal idea underlying the theme of the *femme fatale*. A somewhat transparent exploration of this theme occurs in Rops' *Au Coin de la Rue* (1881) [Fig. 55]. In this drawing, a skeleton disguised as a woman holds a mask over its face representing a young girl with an innocent expression. A figure of a man, who has probably followed the woman to this deserted part of town, is seen emerging from the shadows of the poorly lit street. Hoffman has indicated that the composition and theme is derived from Isidore Grandville's lithograph of 1829 *Voulez-vous monter chez moi, mon petit Monsieur* where the deception of death disguised as a woman prostitute that hides its

skull behind a mask is identical to that of Rops.¹⁵⁵ Rops' *Mors Syphilitica* (c. 1875) [Fig. 27] is a further work which expresses the association between death, personified in the corrupting disease syphilis, and feminine seduction and eroticism, personified by the prostitute. Rops' etching is a stark depiction of an emaciated female form with her garment thrown open exposing her thin body. Yet the focus of the image is the head of the woman which is skull-like and almost fleshless apart from a thin covering of skin stretched tight over the bones. Her sunken eyes and lips are parted to reveal her tiny teeth in a sinister grin. The image seems to be a portrait of the figure of death in Baudelaire's poem *Danse macabre*:

Your hollow eyes that frightful thoughts betray
 Make wary dancers dizzy, and bequeath
 The bitterest nausea, as you display
 Your static grin of two and thirty teeth.

Rops' work reveals, moreover, the explicit association between the feminine in the process of decay and probably refers, moreover, to this theme in Baudelaire's poetry, which is explicitly rendered in his poem from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Une Charogne* (A Corpse). As in *La danse macabre*, the horror of the feminine is mixed with the horror of the corruption of nature and of death. The association between the putrefying corpse and the

¹⁵⁵ Vide Edith Hoffman. 'Notes on the Iconography of Felicien Rops'. *Burlington Magazine*. Number 937, volume 123, April 1981, p. 209. The title is abbreviated from Champfleury's title for Grandville's work in his *Histoire de la caricature moderne* (1865), p. 294, in *ibid.*

Hoffmann has noted with regard to the historical occurrence of the theme in relation to Grandville's work that: 'A skeleton hiding behind the mask of life was of course not a new invention, but from the middle ages to the Baroque it had represented only a reminder of the brevity of human existence on earth, and in the eighteenth century the subject had lost its popularity. Grandville, when adapting the Dance of Death theme to contemporary conditions, had introduced a new, more specific element: to abduct a young man, Death had disguised himself as a prostitute'. (*ibid.*)

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composition of its limbs which 'seemed like a lustful woman, legs in air' suggests a theme peculiar to Baudelaire of the horror of sensual eroticism associated with the feminine:

Around a curve, a carcass, putrefying,
There on a bed of pebbles lay.

It seemed a lustful woman, legs in air,
Exuding poisonous emanations,
Displaying agape, beyond all shame and care,
Its belly rank with exhalations. (FM XXIX)

Moreover, the metamorphoses of the feminine into a corpse, personifying death, which is the essential theme expressed in Rops' work as well, is further evident in Baudelaire's poem in the final stanzas where a strange ambiguity between eroticism and death is expressed:

And you, as well, shall be this putrescence,
This carcass, rotten and abhorred,
Star of my eyes, sun of my spirit's essence,
You, my angel, my adored.

Yes, you shall be as this, O queen of grace,
When the last sacraments are said,
And you, the grasses lush above your face
Are mouldering among the dead. (Ibid.)

Similarly, the figure of Lust in Flaubert's *Temptation of Saint Anthony* exclaims to the figure of Death: 'My rage is a match for yours. I howl, I bite. I sweat like the dying and I look like a corpse'.¹⁵⁶ In Rops' work an analogous ambiguity between erotic gratification, personified by the prostitute, and death is suggested in the construction of the prostitute as a living corpse.

This association between Rops and Baudelaire is not without historical precedent. Baudelaire's influence on Rops (and vice

¹⁵⁶ Flaubert *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, *op cit.*, p. 219.

versa) is well documented.¹⁵⁷ The friendship between the two artists began soon after Baudelaire arrived in Brussels in April 1864. Rops remarked in a letter to the publisher Poulet-Malassis that the friendship was based on a particular common passion:

Baudelaire est l'homme dont je desire le plus vivement faire de la connaissance, nous nous sommes recontres dans un amour etrange, l'amour de la forme cristallographique; la passion du squelette...¹⁵⁸

This mutual 'passion du squelette' was realised in an early collaboration on Baudelaire's *Les Epaves* for which Rops provided the illustration for the cover. The illustration features a striking image of an arborescent skeleton emerging from a chaotic pile of debris. The image was inspired by a plate reproduced in Eustache Langoises' *Essai Historique, Philosophique et Pittoresque sur les Danses des Mortes* of 1852.¹⁵⁹ The work is a compilation of various medieval and Renaissance legends dealing with the theme of death.¹⁶⁰ The particular image which served as the basis for Rops' work is entitled *Adam and Eve* in which the skeletal form of the Tree of life extends its traditional meaning of temptation to include that of Death. This equation between

¹⁵⁷ Vide especially Hoffmann, 'Notes on the Iconography of Félicien Rops', *op. cit.* p. 213 and note 33 as well as E. Holtzman, 'Félicien Rops and Baudelaire: Evolution of a frontispiece'. *Art Journal*. XXXIII/2, Winter 1978-79, pp. 102-106.

¹⁵⁸ Vide P. Dufay, '18 Lettres de Félicien Rops a Poulet-Malassis'. *Mecure de France*. October 1933, p. 48.

¹⁵⁹ Baudelaire was precise in his conceptualisation of the image and notes in a letter to Nadar the iconography and source for his conception:

Ici un squelette arborescent, les jambes et les côtes formant le tronc; les bras étendus en croix s'épanouissant en feuilles et bourgeons, et protégeant plusieurs rangées de plantes vénéneuses, dans de petits pots échelonnés, comme dans une serre de jardinier. Cette idée m'est venue en feuilletant l'histoire des *Danses macabres* d'Hyacinthe Langlois.

Quoted in Helene Cassou-Yager *La Polyvalence du Thème de la Morte dans Les Fleurs du Mal de Baudelaire*. Librairie A.-G. Nizet, Paris, 1979, p. 17.

¹⁶⁰ Vide Ellen Holtzman, *op. cit.* p. 102.

temptation and death is, as we have already suggested above, transformed in Rops' work and is denoted in the association between the prostitute and the skeleton, personifying the association between the feminine and death. In other words, in Rops' work, *death is the feminine*. As Hoffmann has observed:

As to Rops, the skeleton, which had been one of the marginal figures in his earlier works became one of his favourite symbols and retained the central position it had been given in *Les Epaves*. However, it underwent an important transformation: from now on it appeared dressed up as a woman...It became feminine, as is *la mort* in French, and Rops used it when he wanted to represent woman as the bringer of death.¹⁶¹

This particularly Baudelerian association is again evident in Rops' *La Mort qui Danse* (c. 1875). The image depicts a gaunt female figure whose head is a skull. The figure is almost entirely naked except for a hat, long gloves, stockings with garters and little pompommed shoes. She also wears a thin skirt which she lifts to reveal her charms. Two male figures stare on from the shadows. The title of the work suggests an association with the theme of the Dance of Death and is most probably associated more directly with Baudelaire's poem *Danse Macabre*. Indeed there are overt relations in the imagery used by Baudelaire in his poem to describe the image of death and Rops' female figure. A climate of ambivalence is created in Baudelaire's poem between the feminine and death:

Proud, as though living, of her stateliness,
With handkerchief and gloves and great bouquet,
Hers is the flippancy and heedlessness
A slim absurd coquette might well display.

Has any ball produced a slimmer waist?
Her gown whose ample folds so royally shower,
Sweeps richly round her fleshless feet encased
In Pompommed shoes as pretty as a flower.

A frill about her clavicles she wears,
Which like a wanton stream that laps the rock,

¹⁶¹ Hofmann, *op. cit.* p. 214.

Modesty veils from cold derisive stares,
Grim charms not meant for those inclined to mock.

Her dark and hollow eyes, unseeing, gaze,
Her skull with flowers charmingly bedecked,
On fragile vertebrae inertly sways:
O lure of nothingness, so weirdly decked.

A caricature. Yes, some may use that name
Who, flesh-besotted, do not know at all
The nameless beauty of the human frame:
For me, great skeleton, your charms enthrall.
(FM XCVII)

Baudelaire's poetry displays a distinct connection with themes derived essentially from the middle ages with regard to the theme of death. J. Huizinga in his work *The Waning of the Middle Ages* distinguishes three principle aspects of the theme of death at the end of the Middle Ages, namely, the obsession with the inexorable flow of time; the horror and the fascination of the cadaver which evolves into the horror of age and of physical decay and finally, the *danse macabre*, which is the symbol of the terror in relation to the suddenness and inevitability of death and also symbolic of the equality of all men and women in death.¹⁶²

In Baudelaire's poetry, and also in Rops' images, the motif of death is transformed and given an ambiguous, if not disquieting, aspect. The main characteristic of this transformation of the motif of death is the inclusion of the sphere of the erotic. In Rops' work, this was seen in *Mors Syphilitica* and *La mort qui Danse*. It is argued here that the element of the erotic and physical gratification can be seen as another variation of the theme of sensualism which personifies the material sphere or materialism as such. The revulsion of the flesh, suggested in the erotic charms of the prostitute, could thus be taken as an

¹⁶² J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. London, Arnold and Co., 1937, p. 125.

expression of the repulsion of this sphere - the material order of reality - and acts as a warning, which is expressed in the decayed features of Rops' prostitutes, against the trap of the sensual allurements of the material world. Cassou-Yager has noted a similar aspect in Baudelaire's exploitation and transformation of the theme of death in the *Danse macabre*:

Ce n'est pas la vanité des grandeurs de ce monde que Baudelaire dénonce dans sa *Danse Macabre*, mais la vanité du culte de la chair. Et, s'il se moque tant d'acharnement de son squelette déguisé en femme, c'est pour venger à la fois du néant de la volupté, et d'avoir succombé à son appel... Chez Baudelaire, la haine et la terreur de la femme se mêlent inextricablement à l'horreur de la mort.¹⁶³

This seems to reinforce, amongst other things, the notion that the anti-feminine quality of Symbolist art is a metaphoric construction for the anti-naturalist impulse in their art and culture. This impulse stands, as already indicated, against their overarching impulse directed towards the reestablishment of the reality of the spiritual and the inner, subjective order of reality. It has already been stressed that there is a reciprocal relationship between matter and spirit in Symbolist thinking. Rather than avoiding the material order of reality entirely, there is an attempt to spiritualise it and to integrate it into the spiritual order. It is the 'vanité du culte de la chair' i.e. the celebration of matter (eroticism etc.) for its own sake which is execrated.

The theme of the Dance of Death is central to one of Rops' most striking and well known paintings, *La mort au bal*. (c. 1865 - 1875) [Fig. 28]. The painting represents a skeleton wearing an evening dress and cloak. Hoffmann has noted that the image echoes the old legend of Death appearing in the middle of a revelling

¹⁶³ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

company, which found early literary representations in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The theme attained new topicality through the outbreak of the cholera epidemic of 1832 in Paris. Heine described the panic which seized the dancers at a ball when a cholera victim was discovered among them in a report which appeared in the *Ausberger Allgemeine Zeitung* of 19 April 1832.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, Hoffmann has observed that 'Rops' Death... is not just a woman but a female seducer and bringer of perdition. The perdition, furthermore, is no longer cholera, but venereal disease'.¹⁶⁵

Indeed, the prevalence of syphilis at the end of the nineteenth century and the opprobrious moral and political connotations associated with the disease in the puritanical age of high Victorianism made it, as Elaine Showalter has observed, a 'symbolic illness' and a significant theme in *fin-de-siècle* culture.¹⁶⁶ The French historian Alain Corbin termed the period the 'golden age of venereal peril'.¹⁶⁷ Roger Williams in his work *The Horror of Life* argues that the pervasive *mal-de-siècle* and the feelings of revulsion towards life at the end of the nineteenth century were a result of the effects of venereal disease, especially syphilis.¹⁶⁸ Showalter has asserted in this regard that the infection of venereal disease was considered amongst the avant-garde as a sign of moral superiority:

In France, particularly, male writers had become obsessed with the idea of syphilis and madness as the

¹⁶⁴ Hoffmann, *ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy, Gender and culture at the Fin-de-Siècle*. London, Bloomsbury, 1991, p. 189.

¹⁶⁷ Alain Corbin, 'Le péril vénérien au début du siècle: prophylaxie sanitaire et prophylaxie moral', *Recherches*. Volume 27 December 1977, pp. 245-83. Quoted in Showalter, *ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁶⁸ Roger Williams, *The Horror of Life*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980.

proud badges of the *poète maudit*... such French writers as Baudelaire, the Goncourt brothers, Flaubert, Maupasant and Daudet celebrated their syphilis, hallucinations, ennuis, depressions, seizures, and tremors in the confidence that their 'horror of life', their embrace of *le mal*, their sense that health was 'plebian and contemptible' made them superior to the bourgeoisie and representative of a more advanced, if less hardy, creative humanity.¹⁶⁹

Moreover, Showalter indicates that the siphilophobic propaganda of the period focused on, amongst others, the prostitute as the major source of infection. She observes that the 'prostitute was the agent of corruption and contamination, whose putrid body bred stench and disease'.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, the prostitute's body was the vessel in which men discharged and mingled polluting fluids. In a popular novel *Les Mancenilles* (1900) by Andre Couvreur, syphilis is thus spread by the prostitute Frida 'whose bed has become the cesspool of all people of colour of the quarter, bringing their vice and disease from all the four corners of the world'.¹⁷¹ Showalter, furthermore makes the important observation that the hostility towards the prostitute could be generalised to apply to all women as was expressed in various novels of the period.¹⁷² Read in the light of these observations, Rops' images dealing with the decaying prostitute and with the association with death assume a particular historical relevance. Yet, it could also be argued that his adoption of the image of the syphilitic prostitute (*Mors Syphilitica*) conveys a certain meaning couched in an image which would have been readily understood by his contemporaries concerning the association between the feminine and death.

¹⁶⁹ Showalter, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Showalter, *ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

A final image worth considering in relation to the theme of the feminine and death is Rops' work *Diaboli virtus in limbus* (1897-1881) [Fig. 29]. The work was used as a frontispiece for Péladan's novel *Initiation Sentimentale* (1887). The image was probably created earlier as Rops mentions it in an undated letter to Noilly as a possible frontispiece for the *Album du Diable* which they planned to publish after the completion of *Les 100 legers croquis* (1881).¹⁷³

The image is important in so far as it condenses and synthesises various motifs which are associated particularly with the negative feminine in Rops' work. The image is a startling hybrid. The torso is skeletal apart from the fleshy breast, the head is a skull and the arms are bones, while the lower part of the figure is fleshy and well rounded. The figure holds a bow in the left hand and the finely curved wings and quiver suggests an association with Cupid. In the background a tree is represented with a snake entwined around it referring to the theme of original sin and the temptation of Eve which was a common image in fin-de-siècle iconography of the *femme fatale*. The image of Eve occurs frequently in Rops' work in a variety of permutations as is seen in for example his *Le Pecheur Mortel* (1888) which represents a female figure with a serpent coiled around her body and a tree emerging from her head - motifs suggestive of the Biblical theme of original sin and carnal desire. The latter notion is reinforced in *Le Pecheur Mortel* in so far as the serpent appears to be biting the woman's breast which has associations with the iconography of Cleopatra. The figure in *Diaboli virtus in lumbis*, furthermore, holds the severed head of a male in her right hand with an obvious reference to the theme of Salome, the archetypal *femme fatale* in Symbolist iconography.

¹⁷³ Hoffmann, *ibid.*, p. 218.

Huysmans referred to this figure as, 'cette Salomé de sépulchre'.¹⁷⁴

This image is a cogent condensation of the themes associated with the negative feminine in Rops' work specifically and in Symbolist art generally. The importance of this work is that these themes are brought together under the construction of the feminine as death. The voluptuous form of the buttocks and breast and the allusion to cupid suggests the association between death and the erotic. The ambivalent relationship between Eros and Thanatos formed a fundamental theme in Symbolist culture which deserves further exploration. The suggestions made in connection with Rops' work in relation to this theme is sufficient to demonstrate the extent to which these ideas informed his art.

III

The Negative Feminine and Idealism

In the above discussion it has already been suggested that the feminine, which is constructed in terms of animal, nature, eroticism, sensuality, evil and death, can really be viewed as various expressions for a single underlying construct, i.e. Materialism. This would suggest an interpretation of the so-called anti-materialist\anti-feminine attitude in Symbolist art and thinking. This paper argues that this attitude can be understood to conform in every respect to the Idealist position adopted in Symbolist aesthetics regarding the relationship between the Ideal and the Material. Briefly put, this position holds that matter is not negative, or 'evil', in itself but, rather, only so when taken as an end in itself, rather than as

¹⁷⁴ Huysmans, *Certains*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

a means by which transcendence to the spiritual is possible. This view holds that matter can be spiritualised in so far as it incarnates the archetypal Idea. Therefore, it can be the means through which knowledge of the Idea and the Ideal or spiritual realm is achieved. Matter, and the material realm, can thus play a role in the process of transformation from the material to the spiritual order of reality and is therefore viewed in a positive light. On the other hand, indulgence in the material order, as an end in itself, is viewed negatively and is seen as a trap in which one is concealed from spiritual knowledge.

As this paper has already stressed in the Introduction, the Symbolists were not anti-materialist as such. It was indicated that matter and the material world played an important role in the philosophy of the symbol in their art and poetry in so far as the material world, and the physical objects therein, is understood to contain the Ideas, the transcendental principles of the Ideal world. These are 'hidden' in matter and are only perceived through a special activity on the part of the individual. This notion of the Idea embodied in matter is clearly articulated in the neo-platonic Idealist philosophy of Plotinus whose writings had an enormous influence on the *fin-de-siècle* and especially the aesthetic theories and art criticism of Albert Aurier.¹⁷⁵ Plotinus sees matter as the lowest level of existence and the final emanation of the Idea which has its origins in the supreme principle, which he terms the One:

From the beginning to end all is gripped by the forms of the Intellectual Realm: Matter itself is held by the Ideas of the elements and to those Ideas are added other Ideas and others again, so it is hard to work down to crude Matter beneath all that sheathing of

¹⁷⁵ Vide especially, Patricia Townley Mathews, *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*, U M I Research Press, Ann Arbor Michigan, 1986, p. 32, for a detailed discussion on this aspect of Symbolist art theory.

Idea. Indeed since Matter itself is, in its degree, an Idea - the lowest - all this universe is Idea and there is nothing that is not Idea as the archetype was.¹⁷⁶

This suggests a duality in matter which is therefore understood to be both natural and spiritual in so far as it partakes of both the natural and Ideal order of reality. This position has fundamental implications for the understanding of the Symbolists' approach to matter, and hence to their attitude towards nature and the feminine. The natural life including the body, the senses and emotions as well as the sexual impulses are considered to be expressions of the material order of reality. This order of reality is seen, in a neoplatonic context, as a means by which the transcendental realm of the Idea, which is reflected in material forms, can be accessed. The mind is, in other words, transformed through the contemplation of beautiful forms which mediate between the two orders of reality. However, if the attraction to these forms is taken as an end in itself, then the act of desire for forms in the material realm, of nature, sensuality and eroticism as well as the feminine, is regarded as a 'sin'. Plotinus outlines this position in his third *Ennead*:

Those that desire earthly procreation are satisfied with the beauty found on earth, the beauty of image and of body; it is because they are strangers to the Archetype, the source of even the attraction they feel towards what is lovely here. There are souls to whom earthly beauty is a leading to the memory of that in the higher realm and these love the earthly as an image; those that have not attained to this memory do not understand what is happening within them, and take the image for the reality. Once there is perfect self-control, it is no fault to enjoy the beauty of the earth; where appreciation degenerates into carnality, there is sin.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Plotinus, *Enneads*, *Ennead*, V, viii, 7.

¹⁷⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead* III, v, 1.

Thus, as an end in itself, the material realm, of the passions and the erotic, is regarded as evil. Plotinus describes the 'ugly soul' as that trapped in this material order and bereft of its kinship with the Ideal:

Let us then suppose an ugly soul, dissolute, unrighteous: teeming with all the lusts; torn by internal discord... thinking, in the little thought it has only of the perishable and the base; perverse in all its impulses; the friend of unclean pleasures; living the life of abandonment to bodily sensations and delighting in its deformity... it has no longer a clean activity or a clean sensation, but commands only a life smouldering dully under the crust of evil; that, sunk in manifold death, it no longer sees what a Soul should see, may no longer rest in its own being, dragged ever as it is towards the outer, the lower, the dark... An unclean thing, I dare to say; flickering hither and thither at the call of objects and sense, as infected with the taint of the body, occupied always in Matter, and absorbing Matter into itself; in its commerce with the Ignoble it has trafficked away for an alien nature its own essential Idea.¹⁷⁸

The soul becomes ugly, 'by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter'.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, Plotinus equates this 'ugliness' with Evil, 'Ugliness is the Principle contrary to Existence: and the Ugly is also the Primal Evil'.¹⁸⁰

Sensuality, eroticism and instinct, in themselves are thus seen as obstacles to the realisation of the Ideal in life, and through art, and are therefore repudiated. The negative feminine, as personification of these impulses and of materialism, equally is spurned. This position is essentially suggested by Péladan whose Idealist aesthetics supported the notion that the artist has a special task to remain faithful to the expression of ^{the} Ideal and

¹⁷⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I, vi, 5.

¹⁷⁹ Plotinus, *ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I, vi, 6. Mathews discusses parallel ideas in the thinking of Aurier. *Vide Mathews, op. cit.*, pp. 28-35.

to avoid the snares of erotic and material allurements especially as they are personified by the negative feminine:

Sois fidèle à l'idéal, ô poète! N'aime que les idées; laisse au commun des hommes l'amour; c'est là toute leur poésie. Ravis-nous dans tes propres extases; mais ne te traîne pas avec nous dans tes propres tendresses! Vois! les sirènes chantent, les croupes des chimères frémissent, les sphinx battent des mains à ton approche! Ne cherche pas l'enigme de la femme, elle n'en a pas et elle te dévorerait. Qu'aucun main ne se pose jamais, orgueilleuse ou caressante, sur ton front; plus elle serait blanche, mieux elle étoufferait ton génie. Ne presse jamais sur ton coeur que les rêves. Ce baisser que tu veux acheter au prix de ta liberté, je te le refuse. Tu en as déjà un au front qui ferait le mien sacrilège. Les lèvres de la femme seraient profanes là où se sont posées celles de la muse. Tu es plus qu'un homme, tes amours ne doivent pas être de terre comme les nôtres. Va, sois bon est chaste, chante et marche. Ne parle jamais l'infirmes langage des vulgarités, ne t'arrête jamais surtout devant la femme. Sois sublime enfin; c'est ta mission! et remercie Dieu que ton génie t'ait sauvé de mon amour!

The execration of the feminine as personification of nature, animal, evil, eroticism and death can perhaps be understood in the light of this neoplatonic metaphysics of matter. However, the duality of matter also suggests the possibility of spiritual transcendence through matter in so far as it embodies the archetypal Idea. This has already been discussed in the Introduction with regard to the Idealist notion of the symbol. This paradoxical position is identical in many respects to the paradoxical and ambivalent position of the Symbolists towards the feminine. In other words, the feminine is not only seen as the incarnation of Matter and therefore regarded as evil if regarded as an end in itself, but is, moreover, seen as the vehicle, or means, of transcendence from the material realm. This Idealisation of the feminine as a means towards the realisation of the Spiritual order of reality will be dealt with at greater

¹⁰¹ Péladan, *le Vice Suprême. op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

length in the following chapter. Similarly, the attitude towards eroticism and death, as expressions of the material order would be regarded by the Symbolists as partaking of a similar ambivalence and duality. This position, it is felt, is related to the idea, current during the late nineteenth century, concerning the ambivalent relationship between the erotic and death which were ultimately seen as means through which transcendence was possible.

IV

The Ambivalence of Eroticism and Death:

Mystery and Transcendence

The overt association between eroticism and death present in Rops' work which has been examined, constitutes a particular symptom of the age. The fusion of the erotic and death is evident in several literary examples. For example, Clara in Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des Supplices* (1898-99) initiates her lover into the mysteries of love and declares:

Je t'apprendrai des choses terribles...des choses divines...tu sauras enfin ce que c'est que l'amour! Je te promets que tu descendras, avec moi, tout au fond du mystère de l'amour...et de la mort!... L'amour est une chose grave, triste et profonde... L'Amour et la Mort, c'est la même chose...'¹⁹²

Furthermore, Maurice Barrès asserted in his *Du Sang, de la Volupté et de la Mort* that, 'La Mort et la volupté, la douleur et l'amour s'appellent les uns les autres dans notre imagination'.¹⁹³ Remy de Gourmont recognised this essential

¹⁹² Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des Supplices*, pp. 114, 121, 158. Cited in Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, op. cit., p. 278.

¹⁹³ Maurice Barrès, *Du sang, de la Volupté et de la Mort*. Cited in Praz, *ibid.*, p. 378.

association between erotic love, beauty and death and wrote, with regard to Pierre Louys' *Aphrodite* (1896):

Mais aussi qu'une telle littérature est fallacieuse! toutes ces femmes, toutes ces chairs, tous ces cris, toute cette luxure si animale et si vaine, et si cruelle! Les femelles mordillent les cervelets et mangent les cervelles; la pensée fuit éjaculée; l'âme des femmes coule comme par une plaie; et toutes ces copulations n'engendrent que le néant, le dégoût et la mort... l'idée de la mort vient se joindre l'idée de la beauté; et les deux images, enlacées comme deux courtisanes, tombent lentement dans la nuit.¹⁸⁴

Moreover, the idea of the intermingling of love and death is particularly overt in the works of Wagner and especially his *Tristan und Isolde* where death in love or love in death personifies a form of transformation beyond the restraints of the ordered material world. In other words, it implies a transcendence, a union in death which constitutes a form of liberation. This idea of a blissful, or mystical-erotic transcendence through death is most expressly stated in Isolde's *Liebestod* at the end of Act Three in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Isolde sings:

Do I alone/ hear this melody/ which, so wondrous/ and tender/ in its blissful lament,/ all revealing,/ gently pardoning/ sounding from him.../ As they swell/ and roar around me,/ Shall I breath them,/ Shall I listen to them?/ Shall I sip them./ Plunge beneath them,/ to expire/ In sweet perfume?/ in the surging swell,/ in the ringing sound,/ in the vast wave of the world's lament,- to drown/ to sink/ unconscious - supreme bliss.¹⁸⁵

This scene of Isolde's *liebestöd* is taken up in Jean Delville's work *Tristan und Isolde* (1887) [Fig. 30] which expresses the ambivalence of the moment where Isolde sinks lifeless into the

¹⁸⁴ Remy de Gourmont, *Le Livre des Masques*, volume i, pp. 185-186. Cited in Praz, *ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁸⁵ See Richard Wagner *Tristan and Isolde*, English translation by Frederick Jameson, Schott and Co. Ltd., London (n.d.), pp. 383-387.

body of the dead Tristan. In Delville's work the two corpses seem to be physically united. The problem of love and death, and the consummation of the one in the other, seems to be at the heart of Wagner's art. Not only does it occur in *Tristan und Isolde* but also in the final act of *Götterdammerung* where Brünnhilde is united with her murdered lover-hero Siegfried as she is immolated in the firey pyre over Siegfried's body. In *Tannhäuser* the protagonist is redeemed from the sin of his erotic indulgences on the Venusberg only in death.

Moreover, the notion of the transcendence through death and the experience of 'Ideal' love suggested in *Tristan und Isolde* occurs in Baudelaire's poetry as well. The desire to escape from the physical, sensual realm of flesh and eroticism as well as the transformation, or spiritualisation, of love through death is expressed in Baudelaire's poem *La Mort des amants* (*Les Fleur du Mal*, CXXI). Cassou-Yager notes: 'Une première lecture de 'La Mort des amants' nous emporte dans l'atmosphère très éthérée de l'Idéal baudelairien; une deuxième lecture suggère l'existence d'un *sub-stratum* nettement sensuel. Ce poème est le chef d'oeuvre de la sublimation de la passion'.¹⁸⁶ The ambiguity between love and death is evident in the first quatrain where the lover's bed is compared to a tomb and the flowers suggest both funerary flowers but also carry an erotic element in the image of their 'blooming' and in their 'exoticism'.¹⁸⁷

We shall have beds where fragrance fills the air,
Couches profound and easeful as the tomb;
And strange exotic flowers everywhere,
From fairer climbs, for us alone shall bloom.

In the second quatrain the death of the lovers is juxtaposed with the paroxysm of sensual climax, associated with 'death:' 'Vieing,

¹⁸⁶ Cassou-Yager, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁷ *Vide* *ibid.*

as final flames of passion flare,/ Our hearts, two mighty torches shall illumine /Our souls: those mirrors which, a perfect pair,/ Reflect these flames, consumed as they consume'. In the third stanza, the throes of death are mingled with the imagery of 'spiritual' illumination at the moment of the intensity of pleasure: 'A single final flash we shall exchange,/ A long-drawn sob, full-charged with parting's pain...' Here the ambivalence between eroticism and death persists where the heat of passion is transformed into light; the 'single final flash' could symbolise the intensity of pleasure as well as a meaningful exchange of looks and the 'long-drawn sob' seems to express the sadness of separation but also evokes the cries and sighs after the encounter.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, Cassou-Yager has noted that the union in death is expressed in specific images: 'Cette union dans la mort, le vocabulaire même l'exprime. La dualité des flambeaux, des lumières et des miroirs du deuxième quatrain se mue en l'unité de 'l'eclaire unique' du premier tercet'.¹⁸⁹ In the final stanza, it is the Angel of Death that brings about the transformation through love and sanctifies and spiritualises the union of the lovers.

Death, as much as the erotic, constituted a mystery in the thinking of *fin-de-siècle* culture. Péladan celebrated the mystery of death in *La Penthée* (1892):

Threshold of mystery, pronaos of infinity, macabre key door, it is you who render liberty to the soul imprisoned by the body: but she, accustomed to her jail recoils before the splendid penumbra of the beyond: puerile and timid, and prudent without you, she is obstinate, preferring to vegetate in the habitual mode than to risk herself in the noble unknown. Your grimacing horror, O caricatured one, is the work of our laziness which revolts against the

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

salutary gadfly. O Death, sublime portal, Death,
portal of mystery.¹⁹⁰

The relationship between eroticism, death and transcendence discussed above suggests another problem central to Symbolist aesthetics and culture, namely, the relationship between eroticism and mysticism. The ambivalence between eroticism and mysticism was cultivated in Symbolist imagery, especially in the image of the *femme fatale* whose enchanting allurements are minutely described. The ambivalence between the erotic and the mystical has been observed by Howe who comments, with regard to the image of the *femme fatale* in Symbolist art:

...the urgings of sexual lust are meant to be interpreted in a metaphysical as well as a physical sense as a symbol for humanities desire for the unknown, for transcendental experience. Like the Neoplatonists before them, the Symbolists believed that the mechanics of sensual desire paralleled those of spiritual desire.¹⁹¹

Moreover, in the occult tradition, sexual temptation was the final trial of the initiate and can be seen, paradoxically, as the means of transformation. This is clearly related in Edouard Schuré's *The Great Initiates* (1888).¹⁹² Schuré describes the temptation of Krishna by Nyasumba:

"Krishna," said the daughter of the serpent king, "your countenance is smoother than the snows of Himavat, and your heart is like the tip of a bolt of lightning. In your innocence you shine above the kings of the earth. Here no one has recognised you; even you do not know yourself. I alone know who you are. The

¹⁹⁰ Excerpted in Joséphin Péladan, *La Queste du Graal*, Paris, 1893, p. 198. Cited in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁹¹ Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁹² This work had an enormous influence on the Symbolists and sought to demonstrate the essential continuity of esoteric thought in the lives and writings of eight historical figures from Rama, Krishna, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato to Jesus. The work includes detailed expositions of esoteric doctrine as expressed in the writings of these.

Devas have made you master of men; I alone can make you master of the world. Are you willing?¹⁹³

Schuré describes the queen in images reminiscent of those already encountered in the images of the *femme fatale* in Symbolist art, with specific reference to the snake as an image of temptation and desire as in, for example, von Stuck's *Sin*:

As she spoke, the queen raised herself, domineering, fascinating, terrible as a beautiful snake. Sitting upright on her couch, she cast a flame of such dark fire into Krishna's limpid eyes that he trembled. Hell appeared in those glances. He saw the abyss of the temple of Kali, goddess of desire and death, where snakes writhed in an everlasting agony.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Edouard Schuré, *The Great Initiates, A Study of the Secret History of Religions*. Translated from the french by Gloria Rasberry, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1968, p. 100.

¹⁹⁴ Schuré, *ibid.*, p. 99. The association between the feminine and the serpent is fundamental to the iconography of the *femme fatale* in Symbolist art. Although a detailed analysis of this complex symbol is beyond the scope of this paper it may be worth mentioning it in passing. Apart from von Stuck's image, the theme is also evident in Khnopff's *The Blood of the Medusa*, Jean Delville's *The Idol of Perversity*, Redon's *Serpent Auréole* (1890) and *The Green Death*. It is worth noting that the crown of flowers worn by the feminine image in Delville's work is probably a reference to Cleopatra, one of the familiar subjects for the representation of the *femme fatale* during the *fin-de-siècle*. The image suggests, moreover, Theophile Gautier's description of Cleopatra in his novel *Nuit de Cléopâtre* (1845):

Cléopâtre elle-même se leva son trône, rejeta son manteau royal, remplaça son diadème sidéral par une couronne de fleurs, ajusta des crotales d'or à ses mains d'albâtre, et se mit à danser... L'amour du coeur, la volupté des sens, la passion ardente, la jeunesse inépuisable et fraîche, la promesse du bonheur prochaine, elle exprimait tout.

Cited in Praz *op. cit.*, 216 (no citation from original). Vide also Betina Polak, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-46, for a discussion of this motif.

Other variations on the association between the serpent and the theme of the *femme fatale* among the Symbolists were the images of Medusa and Eve. Khnopff's *Blood of the Medusa* and Toorop's *Woman with Snake Head* (1892) explore this theme of the Medusa. The theme of Eve can be seen in works such as Gustave Moreau's *Eve*, von Stuck's *Sin*, Rops' *Eritis Similes Deo* and *The Mortal Sinner* and in Levy-Dhurmer's *Eve*. Vide also Bettina Polak *op. cit.*, pp. 33-35 for further discussion of the theme of the Medusa and Cleopatra.

In another important passage, Schuré describes the temptation of a novice undergoing initiation in the temples in Egypt. The initiate has to conquer sexual temptation in order to achieve self-mastery which is the final and most important phase in the stages of initiation. The initiate is tested by being exposed to a beautiful and seductive woman. Significantly, Schuré describes the female sensual temptress in terms akin to those we have found in the images of Khnopff and the writings of Baudelaire where the *femme fatale* as seducer is equated with the animal.

...he saw an overwhelming vision of life and infernal seduction a few steps away from his bed. A Nubian woman, clothed in transparent dark-red gauze, a necklace of amulets at her neck...was standing there embracing him with her glance, holding a cup crowned with roses in her left hand. She was one of the type whose intense, strong sensuality embodies all the powers of the female animal: high, prominent cheekbones, nostrils dilated, full lips like a delicious, ripe fruit. Her dark eyes shone in the dusk.¹⁹⁵

The association between the image of the *femme fatale* as temptress and seducer is clearly evident in this passage. The construction of the image in Schuré's work as a vehicle for spiritual transformation or initiation suggests the association between eroticism and death peculiar to the symbol of the negative feminine during the *fin-de-siècle* which has been outlined above. These themes, it has been suggested, are associated with the idea of 'mystical' transformation in Symbolist art.

The ambivalent attitude to the feminine, especially the negative feminine, discussed in the above sections, constitutes one of the essential features of Symbolist culture, already stressed in the Introduction, namely the ambiguous, paradoxical and equivocal

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

nature of the aesthetic programme of this period. The dual nature of the symbol of the negative feminine, at once the source of death and extinction as well as the means of transformation and transcendence, perfectly characterises the complexity of the ontological and aesthetic dilemma which confronted non-Realist artists and writers.

The discussion of the negative feminine in this chapter aims to account for the Idealist and spiritual background in Symbolist aesthetics and painting. This chapter has stressed that the image of the negative feminine is more than merely a construct of projected male erotic anxiety, but is a complex symbol which is intimately associated with Symbolist Idealism. This is an aspect of the symbol of the feminine which is hardly recognised in the literature on the art of this period. It should further be stressed that this symbol should not be read in isolation. Rather, it must be seen as part of the problem of the symbolic feminine which encompasses both 'negative' and 'positive' attributes. It is to the latter that attention will now be drawn.

THE MYTHIC FEMININE AS PERSONIFICATION OF
THE IDEAL AND THE MYSTICAL
IN SYMBOLIST ART

The present chapter will discuss the nature of the 'Ideal feminine' in Symbolist art and culture. The term 'Ideal feminine' is adopted here to refer to the construction of the mythic feminine as a personification of the philosophical notion of the 'Ideal'. This construct, it will be recalled from the discussion in the Introduction, refers to a transcendental state which is diametrically opposed to the natural or material order of reality. Further, it has been indicated in the Introduction that the realm of the Ideal was understood during the Symbolist period to be the site of mystery and mystical activity. Knowledge of this realm, moreover, could be attained by means of the Symbol which mediated between the Ideal and the Material orders of reality. The present chapter will build on these basic Idealist notions and focus on several issues fundamental to Idealist aesthetics which are specific to the construction of the Ideal or positive feminine. Attention will be paid to the notions of Ideal Love and Ideal Beauty in the writings of Schopenhauer, Plotinus and Plato. It will be argued that these constituted the general conceptual structure within which the Ideal feminine was constructed in Symbolist painting.

In so far as the image of the positive feminine in Symbolist art was understood to personify the notion of Ideal beauty, it was believed that one could, according to Idealist epistemology, gain

insight and knowledge of the Ideal through the contemplation of beauty as it is incarnate in the physical and portrayed in painting. The beauty of the feminine was understood to be a reflection of the Ideal and was thus understood to be the *medium* between the material order and the Ideal order of reality. An important implication of this is that the feminine was regarded as a guide between the two realms; conveying the artist or spectator from the physical to the metaphysical, from the natural to the spiritual and from earthly beauty to transcendental Beauty. As will be indicated in more detail, the many symbolic portraits of the feminine, as images of Ideal beauty, in Symbolist art can be interpreted specifically in this light.

The discussion in this chapter of the Idealist background of the image of the positive construction of the mythic feminine will provide a foundation for the general conceptualisation of the positive feminine as a spiritual force and the personification of the inner world of mystery and the mystical. This, it will be recalled from the Introduction, was the object of artistic activity amongst Symbolist artists and writers and the goal towards which aesthetic activity was directed. To this extent many Symbolist images are directed towards evoking this inner spiritual world of mystery and the Ideal. The image of the feminine is at the centre of many of these works which are constructed in dream-like 'Ideal' interiors or in Ideal landscapes or forests at twilight. The image of the feminine in these works, usually bathed in an ethereal atmosphere of nostalgia, solitude and silence, evoke the theme, as will be suggested in this chapter, of the feminine as soul, the embodiment of spiritual knowledge.

Finally, this chapter will focus on certain motifs associated with the positive feminine such as the veiled feminine and the

feminine as Mother-Goddess and progenitor of creative and spiritual life. The image of the veiled feminine, it will be argued, is associated with the theme of the feminine as a figure of initiation and guide in spiritual transformation. The feminine as symbol of the maternal will similarly be viewed as a symbol of transformation.

I

The Feminine as Personification of Love, Beauty and the Ideal

In Symbolist art the spiritual nature of the positive feminine is derived largely from transcendental principles in Idealist aesthetics such as the notions of Love, Beauty and the Ideal. These, as has already been stressed, were central to Symbolist thought and formed the basis of their esoteric and spiritual approach to existence and art.

These constructs were embodied in a wide range of works which centre on the image of the feminine. The most explicit of these is in images where the central subject is a single figure, or a small group of figures, in a vaguely articulated or abstract environment. The focus is usually exclusively on the image of the feminine - as an abstract image of contemplation. Khnopff's numerous images of the feminine are notable in this regard. Many of Khnopff's images are titled simply *Tête de femme* or *Etude de femme* and focus exclusively on the face and shoulders of the figure. The construction 'de femme' instead of 'd'une femme' emphasises the abstract nature of the subject and suggests that it is a representation of the feminine as such, rather than of a specific woman in reality.

Khnopff's paintings of standing female figures incarnate the type of feminine beauty which is associated with the notion of Ideal beauty. A prominent example is the work titled *Arum Lily* (1895) which represents a standing female figure dressed in a close fitting white dress with a high collar up to her chin. In front of the figure is an arrangement of arum lilies. The face of the figure is a characteristic rendering of Khnopff's favoured female type with traits derived from his sister Marguerite of which the short hair, straight nose and prominent chin and jaw are the distinguishing features. These features occur repeatedly in Khnopff's representations of the feminine usually with only slight variations. The following chapter will discuss Khnopff's recourse to these features as an expression of the symbol of the androgyne, the symbol *par excellence* of the Ideal. With regard to the representation of his sister, Howe has noted that Khnopff's 'portrayals of her take on a sacred quality as she becomes his personification of the ideal virgin-sister, pure and cerebral'.¹⁹⁶

This representation of the feminine in the abstract as an image of devotion and contemplation is also found in the work of Edmond Aman-Jean. Aman-Jean's *Head of a Woman*¹⁹⁷ (c. 1897) is similar to Khnopff's images mentioned above in so far as it focuses on the head and hands of the woman which support the head. Aman-Jean's rendering of the face is characteristic of the way the Ideal feminine is articulated in Symbolist imagery. Instead of a defined outline, the edges of the figure are blurred and undefined. As a result, the image appears to merge with the

¹⁹⁶ Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁹⁷ Illustrated in Julius Kaplan *et al.*, *Symbolism: Europe and America at the end of the Nineteenth Century*. Exhibition Catalogue, California State College Art Gallery, San Bernardino, April 27 - June 10 1980, California State College, San Bernardino, 1980, plate 2.

surroundings which suggests a quality of insubstantiality. The figure is, so to speak, dematerialised, in other words, 'spiritualised'. This also suggests that the figure is not part of the material order of reality, but rather partakes of a different order of reality, of the inner dimension of the mystical and the Ideal. Rather than referring to something explicit, the figure is suggestive and allusive. As will be seen in the course of this chapter, this manner of representation is peculiar to the Ideal feminine and is encountered frequently in Symbolist art. It is above all in images such as these which focus on a single figure as an object of devotion or contemplation which can be read in terms, although not exclusively so, of the transcendental aesthetics of Idealist philosophy. It may be instructive therefore now to focus attention on this aspect of Symbolist culture.

i) Idealist Metaphysics and the Cult of Beauty

As already discussed in the Introduction, the aesthetic ethos of the late nineteenth century was dominated by the notion of the Ideal. The phrase 'The Ideal', *l'Idéal*, was understood less as a critically rigorous philosophical term than a generally felt sense of the unknown, the abstract and mystical beyond, the '*Au Delà*'. The notion of the Ideal is the most fundamental concept of the Symbolists' metaphysical system. It represents, among other things, the ideally sought for realm of experience which opposes in every respect the mundane and prosaic elements of material reality. It signified, for the Symbolists, the spiritual utopia sought for in art, literature and existence. Furthermore, it is associated with the notion of the Idea in the Platonic sense of an eternal and immutable epistemological construct.

The Idealist milieu embraced especially the writings of Plato, Plotinus and Schopenhauer. The writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel were similarly celebrated for their Idealist position, but were not referred to as extensively during the late nineteenth century.¹⁹⁹ Schopenhauer's main work *The World as Will and Representation* appeared in 1819, yet only received significant recognition in Germany in 1850 and was translated into French only in 1886 by Cantouzène.²⁰⁰ Articles on the philosopher did, however, appear as early as 1870, although, his work was introduced in full to a general French speaking audience only in 1874 by Théodule Ribot's work, *La Philosophie de Schopenhauer*.²⁰¹ The first complete translation of Plotinus' main work, the *Enneads*, into French, by M.-N. Bouillet, appeared in 1861.²⁰² The extensive influence of the writings of both philosophers during the Symbolist period has been widely acknowledged.²⁰³

The central tenet of Idealist Philosophy is the acknowledgement that the individual's *subjectivity* is the starting point for the understanding of reality. Thus, Schopenhauer stressed that the starting point of any epistemology is:

...essentially and of necessity, the *subjective, our own consciousness*. For this alone is and remains that which is immediate; everything else, be it what it may

¹⁹⁹ Vide A. G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France 1885-1895*. Second Edition, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1968, pp. 37 *et seq.*, for a comprehensive discussion of the Idealist impulse in Symbolist art.

¹⁹⁹ Vide L. J. Feinberg, 'Symbolism and the Romantic Tradition', *Bulletin Allen Memorial Art Museum*, Oberlin, Ohio, volume 43, Summer 1988, p. 9.

²⁰⁰ Vide Feinberg, *ibid.*, p. 10 and Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²⁰¹ Vide Patricia J. Mathews, *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, University Microfilms International, 1986, p. 32.

²⁰² Vide the Introduction of this paper for references to the literature on the influence of these two philosophers.

is first mediated and conditioned by consciousness and therefore dependant on it.²⁰³

The stress on individual consciousness as the basis for the interpretation and understanding of reality is basic to Schopenhauerean and neo-Platonic subjective Idealism. In this regard, Schopenhauer goes as far as to suggest that existence is not real unless it is conscious to somebody:

...among the many things that make the world so puzzling and precarious, the first and foremost is that, however immeasurable and massive it may be, its existence hangs on a single thread; and this thread is *the actual consciousness in which it exists.*²⁰⁴

The extreme subjectivism, that leads to solipsism, which is implicit in this position was extremely popular during the Symbolist period. Rémy de Gourmont, a leading spokesperson for the new aesthetic, articulated this subjectivist view in the following:

Une vérité nouvelle est entrée récemment dans la littérature et dans l'art; c'est une vérité métaphysique et toute d'a priori (en apparence), toute jeune, puisqu'elle n'a qu'un siècle, et vraiment neuve, puisqu'elle n'avait pas encore servi dans l'ordre esthétique. Cette vérité, évangélique et merveilleuse, libératrice et renovatrice, c'est le principe de l'idéalité du monde. Par rapport à l'homme, sujet pensant, le monde, toute ce qui est extérieur au moi n'existe que selon l'idée qu'il s'en fait... Nous ne connaissons que des phénomènes, nous ne raisonnons que sur les apparences; toute vérité en soi nous échappe; l'essence est inattaquable. C'est ce que Schopenhauer a vulgarisé sous cette formule si simple et si claire: le monde est ma représentation. Je ne vois pas ce qui est; ce qui est, c'est ce que je vois. Autant d'hommes pensants, autant de mondes divers.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated from the German by E. F. J. Payne, in two volumes, Dover, New York, 1969, volume II, p. 4.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰⁵ Rémy de Gourmont, *Le Livre des Masques*, I, 1896, pp. 11-12. Quoted in Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

Furthermore, Schopenhauer distinguishes between two modes of existence, between that which is, and that which appears to be. In other words between the world as 'will' and the world as 'representation': Concerning this distinction, Schopenhauer writes, 'The former is the world of craving and therefore of pain and a thousand different woes. The latter, however, is essentially painless'.²⁰⁶ Schopenhauer's seminal doctrine of *pessimism* was derived essentially from the view that the world is inherently evil, full of 'pain and a thousand different woes'. It was this understanding that attracted the Symbolists most of all to Schopenhauer's philosophy. Schopenhauer explains the origins of this condition of suffering and pain and defines it as a function of a state of incompleteness and of deficiency:

All willing springs from lack, from deficiency and thus from suffering. Fulfilment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remains at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity; fulfilment is short and meted out sparingly. But even the final satisfaction itself is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one; the former is a known delusion, the latter a delusion as yet not known... Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subjects of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace. Essentially it is the same whether we pursue or flee, fear harm or aspire to enjoyment; care for the constantly demanding will, no matter in what form, continually fills and moves consciousness; but without peace and calm, true well being is absolutely impossible. Thus the subject of willing is constantly lying on the revolving wheel of Ixion, is always drawing water in the sieve of the Danaids, and is the eternally thirsting Tantalus.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, in two volumes, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974: volume II, p. 416.

²⁰⁷ Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, *op. cit.*, volume I, p. 196.

The condition of futility and disillusion as a result of the meaningless pursuit of the personal will, including one's personal ambitions and desires, is vividly expressed here. The Symbolist generation was to find in these ideas the perfect correlation to their own disillusionment and pessimism deriving from the over-sophisticated and industrialised culture in which they lived. Huysmans, who contributed to the spread of the popularity of Schopenhauer's thought, celebrated this aspect of Schopenhauer's philosophy in the following passage from *A Rebours*:

Schopenhauer... came nearer to the truth... he took his stand on the iniquity of the world. He cried out in anguish with the *Imitation of Christ*: 'Verily it is a pitiful thing to live on earth'. He... preached the nullity of existence, the advantages of solitude, and warned humanity that whatever it did, which ever way it turned, it would always remain unhappy - the poor because of sufferings born of privation, the rich because of the unconquerable boredom engendered by abundance... Yes it was undoubtedly Schopenhauer who was in the right... He claimed no cures, offered the sick no compensation, no hope; but when all was said and done, his theory of Pessimism was the great comforter of lofty minds and superior souls; it revealed society as it was... pointed out the pitfalls of life, saved you from disillusionment by teaching you to expect as little as possible, to expect nothing at all if you were sufficiently strong-willed, indeed, to consider yourself lucky if you were not constantly visited by some unforeseen calamity.²⁰⁹

It was in art that the Symbolist sought refuge from the onerous conditions of the material world, and especially in an aesthetic system based on the principle of Ideal Beauty. The notion of Ideal Beauty was based on the idea that beauty stems from the realm of the 'Ideal' which contains the essential elements of creation and life, namely, the 'Eternal Ideas' in the Platonic sense. Schopenhauer outlined the basis of this aesthetic and supported the idea that the suffering experienced in the world

²⁰⁹ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

could be overcome through the apprehension of an object of beauty:

...in the beautiful we always perceive the essential and original forms of animate and inanimate nature and thus Plato's Idea's thereof, and that this perception has as its condition their essential correlative, the *will-free subject of knowing*, in other words, a pure intelligence without aims and intentions. On the occurrence of an aesthetic apprehension, the will thereby vanishes entirely from consciousness. But it alone is the source of all our sorrows and sufferings. This is the origin of that satisfaction and pleasure which accompany the apprehension of the beautiful. *It therefore rests on the removal of the entire possibility of suffering.*²⁰⁹

Thus, aesthetic pleasure is achieved through the extinction of the desires stemming from the personal will. And the disappearance of this willing from consciousness is accompanied by the disappearance of pain and suffering.²¹⁰ In this condition, the 'will-free subject of knowing' is able to perceive and share in the essence of an object, in other words, the *Platonic Idea* it embodies.²¹¹ Knowledge must therefore be active without intention and so must be will-less. 'For only in the state of *pure knowing*', Schopenhauer indicates, 'where a man's will and its aims together with its individuality are entirely removed from him, can that purely objective intuitive perception arise wherein the (Platonic) Ideas of things are apprehended'.²¹² This intuitive form of knowledge, Schopenhauer believes, is the real material and kernel, or 'the soul as it were', of a true work of art.²¹³ The contemplation of a work of art affords an escape from the intolerable aspects of the material world. More specifically it is the realisation of the

²⁰⁹ Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena.*, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 415. Emphasis added.

²¹⁰ *Vide ibid.*, p. 416.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 418.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

element of beauty in that object which, through the Platonic Idea it embodies, facilitates the transcendence of material reality. Schopenhauer's aesthetic expresses an idea basic to all idealist theories of beauty that: 'When we say a thing is *beautiful*... we mean that we recognise in the object, not the particular thing, but the Idea'.²¹⁴ Ernst Caro, whose writings on Schopenhauer were instrumental in making accessible his philosophy to the Symbolists, expressed succinctly this component of Schopenhauer's thinking and indicated, furthermore, the aspect of transcendentalism implicit in this position:

The object no longer exists, it is the idea that exists, the eternal form; and the subject likewise has been raised to a higher plane, has liberated himself: he is free from time, free from Will, free from striving, free from desire, free from pain: he participates in the absolute, in the eternity of the idea, he is dead to himself, he no longer exists other than in the ideal. This being so, of what importance are the conditions and forms of his transitory individuality?... there is only pure intuition, a free vision of the ideal, a momentary participation in Plato's idea, in Kant's numen, once one has attained this forgetfulness of one's transitory life, of the role one plays in it and of the everyday torment thus momentarily suspended.²¹⁵

As will be indicated, it was the image of the Ideal feminine in Symbolist painting which served as a vehicle to express this notion of Ideal Beauty. Contrary to the image of the *femme fatale*, which served as a personification of the material, the sensual and Evil (*le Mal*), in other words, as this paper has argued, Materialism - the realm from which the Symbolists desired to escape (hence their anti-naturalism and anti-materialism), the Ideal feminine signified the subjective, spiritual realm which personified the realm of experience that constituted the goal of

²¹⁴ Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, volume I, p. 209.

²¹⁵ Ernst Caro, *Le Pessimisme au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Hachette, 1878, p. 215. Quoted in Pierrot, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

their aesthetic and ontological aspirations. In Schopenhauer's terminology, the *femme fatale* could be understood to signify the 'world as will', or the realm of suffering and evil, and the Ideal feminine could be understood to personify the realm of the 'Platonic Idea', or the world of spiritual 'perfection'. The attempt to transcend the world of material reality constituted an intellectual effort to elevate oneself from the particular to the general and from the concrete to the abstract. This was attempted through the contemplation of the Beautiful which in itself constituted an attempt to draw the eternal from the transitory and hence to participate in immortality - much the same was attempted through the aesthetics of eroticism and death, already discussed. In other words the attempt to disincarnate, to escape the limitations of the body (matter and the material realm generally) resembles a wish to die in so far as death can be perceived as the deliverance of the soul from the prison of the body.²¹⁶

Moreover, the significance of the notion of Ideal Beauty in the Idealist tradition lies in the fact that it is the expression and manifestation of the primal source of existence. This is an idea expressed clearly in the writings of Plato and especially Plotinus.

The early philosophy of Plotinus is related to that of Schopenhauer in as far as he posits an Ideal realm which is regarded as true Reality. Plotinus expands the Idealist discourse on reality to include the notion of the 'All-One', that is, an abstract state of original unity towards which the individual soul is destined to return and which is seen, furthermore, as the

²¹⁶ Vide Cassou-Yager, *op. cit.*, p. 67. Refer to the previous chapter regarding the discussion on the desire for transcendence through death (and love) in Symbolist culture.

highest condition of the Ideal Realm. The All-One, moreover, has various synonyms such as the All Good and Absolute Beauty. Furthermore, it constitutes the first hypostases in the differentiation of the All Being, the construct for ultimate reality. The second hypostasis is the Intellect, or Nous (Mind) wherein is contained the Platonic Ideas that constitute the intelligible world and the third hypostasis is the World Soul, or All Soul which animates nature and mediates between the material realm and the realm of eternal Ideas. The three hypostases are in fact three aspects of a single transcendental being from which all reality proceeds by emanation and towards which all reality aspires to return to its primal source.

It was within the framework of the above threefold constitution of reality that Plotinus constructed his metaphysics of beauty. Plotinus poses the question: 'What is it that attracts the eyes of those to whom a beautiful object is present, and calls them, lures them, towards it, and fills them with joy at the sight?'²¹⁷ An object, he claims, is made beautiful by 'communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine'.²¹⁸ In other words, the beauty of an object is derived from the Ideal-Form it embodies, an idea which would later be central to Schopenhauer's aesthetic. This beauty is ultimately the reflection of the 'Beyond-Beauty', the 'Authentic-Beauty', as he terms it, or the One. This, according to Plotinus, is the principle that ultimately bestows beauty on all material things and he states, moreover, that:

Undoubtedly this Principle exists, it is something that is perceived at first glance, something which the Soul names as from an ancient knowledge, and

²¹⁷ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna, Chapel Hill, North Carolina Press, United States Of America, 1961; *Enneads*, I, vi, 1.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, vi, 2.

recognising, welcomes it, enters into unison with it.²¹⁹

Plotinus believes, in other words, that a correspondence therefore exists between the object of beauty and the transcendent, archetypal principle it embodies. The attraction to the beauty of an object is therefore, in reality, the attraction to that transcendental beauty:

Our interpretation is that our Soul - by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the Noble Existents in the hierarchy of Being - when it sees everything that is kin or any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight, takes its own to itself and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of its affinity.²²⁰

A notion of the Absolute beauty can be grasped, moreover, since it is communicated from its primal state through the various orders of reality, through the three hypostases, to the sensual world. What is perceived as beautiful in the sensual world is only thus in so far as it is a reflection of the Absolute Beauty which is communicated through it:

And this beauty, which is also the Good, must be posed as the First: directly deriving from this first is the Intellectual-Principle which is pre-eminently the manifestation of Beauty; Through the Intellectual-Principle, Soul is Beautiful. The beauty in things of a lower order - actions and pursuits for instance - comes by operation of the shaping soul which is also the author of the beauty found in the world of sense. For the soul, as divine thing, a fragment as it were of the Primal Beauty, makes beautiful to the fullness of their capacity all things whatsoever that it grasps and moulds.²²¹

Finally, art is thus seen as the embodiment of the Ideal-Beauty, or the One:

Art, then, creating in the image of its own nature and content, and working by the Idea, or Reason-Principle of the beautiful object it is to produce, must itself

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, vi, 2.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*, I, vi, 6.

be beautiful in a far higher and purer degree since it is the seat and source of that beauty indwelling in the art, which must naturally be more complete than any confines of the external.²²²

The notion of Ideal Beauty was central to the Symbolists' aesthetic. This has been emphasised in the literature on Symbolism. Gyorgy Vajda asserts that, 'Perhaps never before in the history of... the arts has there been a movement in whose ideology and value system Beauty was given such an eminent position'.²²³ Further he asserts that, 'The ideal of Beauty... is the *primum movens* of the philosophy and aesthetics... of Symbolism'.²²⁴ In Symbolist art the image of the Ideal feminine was the embodiment and personification of this Ideal Beauty.

The view that art was the means through which one could gain access to the realm of the Ideal was fundamental to Symbolist aesthetics. In the words of the Symbolist author and critic, Emile Vehaeren, 'the effect of art, of our art is an influence of a vague attraction towards a melancholy, grave ideal'.²²⁵ In symbolist metaphysics, this was also the function of the Ideal feminine, as muse, who acted as guide or *psychopomp* between the realm of the 'real' and the Ideal. This idea is present in the poetry of Baudelaire, for example, *The Living Torch*. It is in the eyes of the beloved, the muse, through which the poet is guided to the Ideal, to Beauty: eyes that, '...clearly shine, /Magnetic with an Angel's spell they blaze...They light my way to Beauty

²²² *Ibid.*, V, viii, 1.

²²³ Gyorgy M Vajda, 'The Structure of the Symbolist Movement', *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*. Anna Balakian (ed.), Akadémiai Kiado, Budapest, 1982, p. 30.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²²⁵ Emile Vehaeren, 'Silhouettes d'Artistes: Fernand Khnopff'. *L'Art Moderne*, no. 44, October 10 1886, p. 323. Cited in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

like a torch'. The muse as spiritual guide leads the poet eventually to the Awakening to the Ideal:

Ils célèbrent La Mort, vous chantez le Réveil;
 Vous marchez en chantant le réveil de mon âme,
 Astres dont nul soleil ne peut flétrir la flamme.

Moreover, in the Idealist tradition, the mechanism of this translation from one reality to another, from the material to the spiritual, is achieved through the principle of (Ideal) Love. This idea is emphasised in the philosophy of Plato. Plato also posited a principle of Absolute reality, equivalent to Plotinus' 'One' and Schopenhauer's 'World of Representation'. Plato also suggests that the purpose of existence is the search for and attainment of this Ideal condition. Moreover, he expresses the notion that this is possible by means of a gradual ascent through an ascending hierarchy of stages. The fundamental character of this Ideal realm is based on the principle of beauty. The ascent through various levels of experience constitutes an increasing awareness of the character of the idea of Ideal Beauty, which manifests itself in various degrees at each level of the ascending hierarchy. Thus, the aspirant begins through the contemplation of physical beauty of which it should eventually be realised that:

Physical beauty in any person is akin to physical beauty in any other, and that if he is to make beauty of outward form the object of his quest, it is a great folly not to acknowledge that the beauty in all bodies is one and the same.²²⁶

In realising this, the aspirant passes on to the love of beauty of the soul which is to be regarded as more valuable than the beauty of the body, then, to love of beauty as it exists in activities and institutions - and then to morals and the sciences and knowledge generally. The final stage is the love and union

²²⁶ Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by Walter Hamilton, Penguin, 1987, p. 92.

with the Absolute (or Divine) Beauty - the ideal state of original wholeness and perfection. Plato defines the qualities of this condition:

This beauty is first of all eternal, it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes, next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything corporeal or like the beauty of a science, or like the beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing on the earth or in the sky or anything else whatever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things partaking of it, yet in such a manner that while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change.²²⁷

Moreover, in Plato's terms, it is through love that this spiritual transformation is possible. Love is the driving impulse that draws one to the state of Ideal Beauty and original unity through the 'desire' for and attraction to the beauty of that ideal condition. This idea is echoed in Plotinus who asserted that, 'the emotional state for which we make this 'Love' responsible rises in souls aspiring to be knit in the closest union with some beautiful object'.²²⁸ And furthermore he believed, 'It is sound... to find the primal source of Love in a tendency of the soul towards pure beauty'.²²⁹ The teleological

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²²⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads*, *op. cit.*, III, v, 1.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* This is a fundamental concept in the Idealist tradition. Brian Juden summarises well this relationship between love, beauty and the Ideal in the context of the aesthetics of French Romantic Idealism: 'Aux degrés de pureté d'âme et d'amour correspondent des degrés de beauté manifeste dans les formes, montant jusqu'à l'idée absolue du beau, laquelle est au-delà de ce monde qu'elle y fasse son apparition. L'amour doit donc parcourir toute l'échelle de la beauté relative. A l'apogée, l'amour le plus pur et la beauté parfaite, se perdent dans le sein de Dieu, sujet éternel de la beauté et objet éternel de l'amour. C'est pourquoi Platon compare la progression de l'âme et de l'amour vers la perception de l'idée absolue du beau, à

climax of this longing and desire constitutes a form of 'spiritual procreation'. In this regard, Plato writes:

...there are some whose creative desire is of the soul, and who long to beget spiritually, not physically, the progeny which it is the nature of the soul to create and bring to birth. If you ask what that progeny is it is wisdom and virtue in general; of this all poets and such craftsmen as have found out some new thing may be said to be begetters.²³⁰

These ideas on transcendental beauty and metaphysical love are to be found in the thinking of Joséph Péladan whose writings, as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, were strongly influenced by Plato. Péladan advocated the virtue of Ideal love and beauty as an aesthetic imperative:

It is fatal and illegitimate that our desire is awakened by beautiful forms: it is necessary to be subordinated to beautiful sentiments: it is better still if it submits to the supreme charm of beautiful ideas. However, aesthetically, to manifest an idea it is necessary to sentimentalise it by the expression: and the beauty of mystical ideas is expressed by the beauty of the forms... perversity would consist in addressing one's self to instinct, to animal emotions; but in that sense, the patriotic picture is an operation resembling that of a lascivious picture; both aim at the brutal portion of the public.²³¹

Moreover, Péladan believed, as did Plato and Plotinus, that physical beauty and love are reflections of Divine love and beauty and hence our attraction to the physical is actually the attraction to the Divine hidden in the physical (as in a work of art):

The only poetic form comprehensible to all men is love; and within love they sense concupiscence above all. Faced with a work of art they comport themselves as if they were face to face with reality: This is no

l'initiation aux mystères'. Brian Juden, *Traditions Orphiques et Tendances Mystiques dans le Romantisme Français (1800-1855)*, Paris, Editions Klincksiek, 1971, p. 424, emphasis in original.

²³⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, *op. cit.* p. 90.

²³¹ Joséph Péladan *L'Art Idéaliste et Mystique*, Paris, 1894, p. 235. Cited in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

reason to clamour against sexual nudity, because it constitutes the intermediary which permits the common man to have suspicion of beauty.²³²

Péladan's writings were to have a major influence on the artistic generation associated with the *Salon de la Rose+Croix Esthétique*. Significantly, it is in the work of several of the most significant artists who were involved with Péladan and his aesthetic movement in which one finds clear and overt expressions of the mythic feminine: Félicien Rops, Fernand Khnopff, Jean Delville, Alphonse Osbert, Alexandre Séon, Edmond Aman-Jean and Jan Toorop all showed expressions of Péladan's Platonic-inspired Idealist aesthetic. Moreover, the work of all these artists is concerned in one form or another with the image of the mythic feminine, as defined in this paper.

The association between the feminine and the Platonic notions of Love, Beauty and the Ideal, was, however, not peculiar to Symbolist aesthetics but was, in fact, integral to the aesthetic impulse current in the writings of early nineteenth-century writers, for example, Théophile Gautier, Gerard de Nerval, Victor Cousin and Baudelaire. Cousin's idea that, 'Le mouvement de l'âme vers l'idée du beau, c'est-à-dire vers une des idées éternelles,

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 134. This is related to ideas found in Plotinus' thinking where he states that:

Those that desire earthly procreation are satisfied with the beauty found on earth, the beauty of the image and of the body; it is because they are strangers to the Archetype, the source of even the attraction they feel towards what is lovely here. There are souls to whom earthly beauty leads to the memory of that in the higher realm and those love the earthly as an image; those that have not attained to this memory do not understand what is happening with them and take the image for the reality... Once there is perfect self-control, it is no fault to enjoy the beauty of earth; where appreciation degenerates into carnality, there is sin.

Plotinus, *Enneads*, *op. cit.*, III, v, 1.

est l'amour'²³³ is overtly related to the Platonic construction of love, beauty and the Idea already discussed. The construction of the Ideal feminine as the personification of Ideal Beauty and hence of the 'Absolute', that is, the object of the poet's quest, in the terminology of Romantic Idealism or, for that matter, Symbolist Idealism, is a theme that has frequent historical recurrence in Western art and literature. The idealisation of the beloved was a common theme in the writings of Petrarque, Dante, Maurice Scève, Du Bellay and the poets of the Renaissance of the sixteenth century.²³⁴

The construction of the feminine in terms of Platonic love and beauty is, moreover, intrinsic to the poetry of Baudelaire which may have inspired Symbolist aesthetics in this regard. In the poem cycles dedicated to Apolonie Sabatier and Marie Daubrun, Baudelaire's representation of the feminine is constructed in terms of the Platonic notion of Ideal beauty and metaphysical love, especially, *The Living Torch*, *The Spiritual Dawn* and *What will you say tonight, poor lonely one*. The divinisation of the feminine is explicitly rendered in Baudelaire's *Hymne*:

To one most dear, to one most fair,
My spirit's light and clarity,
Idol immortal, angelic, rare,
Hail in immortality!

...

How, my beloved, pure and wise,
Shall I express you truthfully?
Sweet grain of musk that hidden lies
Deep in my soul eternally!

²³³ Victor Cousin, commentary on Plato's *Phaedre*, in *Cours de philosophie*, Paris, Pichon Didier, 1828-1829, 2 volumes, p. 452, 455. Cited in Brian Juden, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

²³⁴ Vide Juden, *ibid.*, p. 424 *et seq.* and Marc Eigeldinger, *Le Platonisme de Baudelaire*, A La Baconnière, Neuchatel, Paris, 1951, p. 46.

A cogent expression of the spiritualisation of the feminine and the celebration of the feminine as the mediator between the Ideal and the Real is to be found in a letter written by Baudelaire to Marie Daubrin. This document contains the essential themes associated with the Platonic tradition in which the feminine is regarded as the personification of Ideal love and beauty:

C'est un sentiment vetueux qui me lie à vous. En dépit de votre volonté, vous serez désormais mon talisman et ma force. Je vous aime, Marie, c'est indéniable; mais l'amour que je ressens pour vous, c'est celui du chrétien pour son Dieu; aussi ne donnez jamais un nom terrestre et si souvent honteux à ce culte incorporel et mystérieux, à cette suave et chaste attraction qui unit mon âme à la vôtre, en dépit de votre volonté. Ce serait un sacrilège. - J'étais mort, vous m'avez fait renaître. Oh! vous ne savez pas tout ce que je vous dois! J'ai puisé dans votre regard d'ange des joies ignorées; vos yeux m'ont initié au bonheur de l'âme, dans tout ce qu'il a de plus parfait, de plus délicat. Désormais vous êtes mon unique reine, ma passion et ma beauté; vous êtes la partie de moi-même qu'une essence spirituelle a formée. Par vous, Marie, je serai grand. Comme Pétraque, j'immortaliserai ma Laure. Soyez mon Ange gardien, ma Muse et ma Madone, et conduisez-moi dans la route du Beau.²³⁵

Baudelaire's letter expresses the essential points related to this tradition which can be summarised as follows: That love is the desire for Ideal Beauty; that Ideal love implies the condemnation of sensuality and establishes the primacy of the spirit over sense, the soul over the body; that the feminine is divinised or spiritualised and, through the agent of Love, is the mediator between the real and the Ideal and the means through which one can participate in Ideal Beauty.²³⁶ These points are present in the writings not only of Baudelaire but also those of Joséph Péladan. Péladan, however, transposes the image of the feminine as the object of the Ideal, to that of the androgyne, which in his aesthetic personifies the characteristics of Ideal

²³⁵ Cited in Eigeldinger, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²³⁶ *Vide* Eigeldinger, *ibid.*

love and Beauty which we have been discussing here. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four.

ii) The Ideal Feminine as Mediator

The aspect of the feminine as mediator between the real and the Ideal indicated as a central component of Baudelaire's conception of the feminine was pervasive during the Symbolist period. This idea was further common in Romantic literature (Novalis, Shelley) and is also encountered in the esoteric tradition. The revelation of the Ideal through the feminine is also a theme in Dante's *Vita Nuova* and expressed through the figure of Beatrice. This mediatory role of the feminine suggests that the feminine is a means through which transformation (or initiation) can be achieved, i.e. a progress towards 'consciousness'. During the Symbolist period, Péladan celebrated the role of the feminine as mediatrix of the Divine through whom the Ideal is revealed. In a vivid dedication to Marie Thérèse Gastelier, printed at the beginning of his eighth novel of *La Décadence Latine, Ethopée*, titled *L'Androgyne*, Péladan takes recourse to Dante in extolling these qualities of the feminine, and in particular, Mlle. Gastelier:

Vous m'avez révélé, Mademoiselle, l'insoupçonnée profondeur cachée en cette prose de la *Vita Nova*... voilà les maîtresses oeuvres du moderne féminin; je l'ai compris par Vous, Mademoiselle, quoique j'eusse proclamé déjà Beatrice Portinari l'emperière de son sexe, puisqu'elle a inspiré, progression sublime, l'Amour de la *Vita Nova*, le mysticisme de la *Divine Comédie* et la magie du *Convito*, belle, sainte et Diotome!

Microcosme du Désir, Evah transforme ses sensations en sentiments, qu'Adamah à son tour surélève en idées: c'est toute l'esthétique des sexes.

Telle qui croit penser psittacise; mais celle qui fait penser, officie un rite splendide. Incitatrice, voici

l'épithète féminine vraiment nommante; incitatrice
d'idéal, voilà la vraie gloire...²³⁷

Mellery's drawing *The Staircase* [Fig. 56] suggests the idea of the feminine as mediator between two realms. Mellery depicts a female figure at the landing of a flight of stairs which leads to another storey. The stairway descends on the left to a storey below. A contrast is created between above and below in so far as the level from which the stairs emerge is in complete darkness while those leading to the upper storey are brightly illuminated. If these levels are interpreted as distinct realms or orders of reality, they suggest a contrast between the darkness of the lower order, the material and the light of the higher order, of the spiritual. According to Mellery, the staircase 'depicts plastically the break in level which makes possible transition from one mode of being to another'.²³⁸ In other words it makes possible the communication between one level and another, between 'above' and 'below', between the spiritual and the physical. In the ascent it suggests the way up to a 'higher' reality. The feminine figure ascending the staircase is the means by which this transition and transformation is made possible.²³⁹

²³⁷ Joseph Péladan, *La Décadence Latine Éthopée, VIII L'Androgyne*. Paris, E. Dentu, pp. VII-VIII. Reprinted in Editions Slatkine, Geneva, 1979.

²³⁸ Quoted in Delevoy, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²³⁹ The symbol of the stair or of steps is related to that of the ladder. Jacob's ladder is an explicit symbol of the bridge between two realms, of the earthly and the spiritual and the means by which the spiritual is accessed from the earthly. The angels ascending and descending the ladder represent the voices which communicate knowledge from the one realm to the other. Each step is a stage in the ascent. In mystical traditions, the stages of initiation are frequently symbolised in the motif of the stairway or the ladder where each stage is a separate rung or step. This is particularly so in alchemy and the Kabbalah and the number of steps varies according to the tradition. Although beyond the scope of this paper, much can be said for the nine stairs depicted in Mellery's work, a number which is resonant in

Mellery's interior is articulated in a way which is characteristic of many Symbolist images. The surfaces of the interior have a grainy texture which creates the effect of their being in some way insubstantial and lacking solidity. It is the effect of seeing an object through a mist or a veil and is characteristic of Symbolist works which evoke the effect of images encountered in dreams or visions which are similarly blurred or indistinct. This indeterminate quality of the spaces rendered enhances the equivocal nature of the image is less a representation of an actual interior but rather an evocation of the subjective interior of the mind and the imagination. This will be more overtly encountered in some of the other images dealing with the Ideal feminine in Symbolist art which will be discussed below.

The notion of the feminine as muse or soul-guide or mediator between the realms of the real and the Ideal is further explicitly suggested in Carlos Schwabe's *The Marriage of the Muse and the Poet* [Fig. 41]. Schwabe's work suggests the traditional theme of the feminine as guide to the beyond, to the realm of the Ideal. The representation of the feminine with wings in this work suggests the theme of the angel which, as will be indicated below, is a common construction of the positive feminine in

the esoteric tradition. Cirlot notes that nine signifies:

The triangle of the ternary, and the triplication of the triple. It is therefore a complete image of the three worlds. It is the end limit of the numerical series before its return to unity. For the Hebrews, it was the symbol of truth, being characterised by the fact that when multiplied it reproduces itself (in mystic addition). In medicinal rites it is the symbolic number *par excellence*, for it represents triple synthesis, that is, the disposition on each plane of the corporal, the intellectual and the spiritual.

J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Translated from the Spanish by Jack Sage. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Henley, 1962, p. 234.

Symbolist art and signifies the spiritual attributes of this symbol. The depiction here of the poet borne aloft in the grasp of an ethereal feminine being expresses the idea that it is through the feminine that transcendence is possible. Furthermore, Jean Delville's *The Angel of Splendour* (1894) [Fig. 31] suggests the theme of the feminine as guide, and as 'Angel', as an etheric spiritual force. The angelic female figure bathed in a radiant nimbus of golden light directs a male figure out of the entanglements of matter signified by the dense plantlife surrounding the figure. She is the guide from one state to another, from the earthly to the heavenly; from the material to the spiritual. These works suggest in various ways the character of the Ideal feminine as the means of transcendence from one order of reality to another, from the material to the metaphysical, and are related in this regard to the convention of metaphysical love and the cult of Ideal Beauty in the Platonic tradition discussed above. Eigeldinger has indicated the character of this construction of the feminine in this tradition and highlights many of the points already raised in the above discussion regarding this attitude towards the Ideal feminine in the context of the Idealist tradition of Love and Beauty:

De cet amour, le poète attend sa propre résurrection et la spiritualisation de son être, et en échange il promet à l'objet de son adoration cette immortalité que confère la poésie. La femme aimée est l'inspiratrice souveraine, l'ange intercesseur dont le regard projette une clarté surnaturelle, elle est l'image sensible d'une Harmonie supérieure et le prétexte dont se sert l'âme du poète pour accéder à la contemplation de la Beauté divine... [la femme] est une Déesse, une Madone, l'Idole à laquelle le poète voue un culte, l'Ange dont il attend le salut par un effet de réversibilité... la femme angélique [est] un agent de la résurrection spirituelle.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Marc Eigeldinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-52, 53.

The notion of transcendence, it should be noted, is the implicit theme in all images dealing with the positive feminine. To this extent this relates the theme of the Ideal feminine to the negative feminine, on the one hand which is associated with the theme of transcendence through the notion of erotic love and death both of which, it has been suggested in the previous chapter, are means through which transcendence is possible. It will also be indicated in the following chapter on the androgyne that this theme is closely associated with that symbol as well. It may be observed, therefore, that the underlying attribute of the mythic feminine in Symbolist art is the notion of transcendence.

II

The Spiritualisation of the Feminine

One of the central attributes of the positive feminine, as personification of the Ideal, is its essentially spiritual nature. In other words, not only is the feminine seen as the personification of this interior spiritual realm of the Ideal but, moreover, the feminine is conceived as a spiritual force itself. This aspect of the feminine was expressed in various ways in Symbolist imagery. Most explicitly, this is expressed in the image of the Angel. This motif is fairly widespread in Symbolist art and is the subject of several prominent Symbolist paintings. The spiritual aspect of the mythic feminine is furthermore alluded to in the specific way the image of the feminine is constructed in Symbolist imagery: either in interiors which are altered in some way to suggest a different order of reality or, on the other hand, in landscapes or forests which are regarded as sacred precincts reflecting the internal spiritual realm. The

image of the veiled feminine and the image of the Mother Goddess are further constructs which refer to the spiritual character of the positive feminine. These will all be examined in turn in the present section.

i) The Angel

On the whole, the spiritual nature of the mythic feminine resulted in a particular attitude toward the feminine during the late nineteenth century which can be described as a tendency to celebrate and exalt the feminine as a positive and creative force. This contrasts with the attitude towards the negative feminine, discussed in the previous chapter, to fear and denigrate the feminine as a negative and destructive force. The celebration of the feminine is cogently expressed by the Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck who wrote:

Woman is closer than man to God. Of all the beings we know, woman seems to be the creature closest to God...woman has more intelligence than man...She sees nothing in isolation. In every object, she seems to see in its unknown secrets the eternal relations of the object itself. All that she sees, she sees simultaneously in three worlds. All her senses are mystical. She sees our destinies in her choice. It is even possible, by the way, that our destinies and our women are discreet sisters who exit, hand in hand, from the same house...the attitude of woman before Eternity is already much different than ours. The man can not have an idea of it except in certain extraordinary moments of his life.²⁴

The celebration of the feminine as a positive, creative force, moreover, is also a theme central to the poetry and writings of Baudelaire. Baudelaire was to give expression to the positive feminine in terms which, as shall be discussed further in this

²⁴ Maurice Maeterlinck, 'Menus Propos', *La Jeune Belgique*, (Brussels), volume 10, January 1891, pp. 36-37. Quoted in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

chapter, characterised that construct: as a source of inspiration, as muse and as the embodiment of the depths of (spiritual) experience. The following passage by Baudelaire, quoted at length, illustrates this position towards the feminine which is also characteristic of the attitude towards the Ideal feminine during the late nineteenth century:

L'être qui est, pour la plupart des hommes, la source des plus vives, et même, disons-le à la honte des voluptés philosophiques, des plus durables jouissances; l'être vers qui ou au profit de qui tendent tous leurs efforts; cet être terrible et incommunicable comme Dieu; cet être...pour qui, mais surtout *par qui* les artistes et les poètes composent leurs plus délicats bijoux; de qui dérivent les plaisirs les plus énervants et les douleurs les plus fécondes, la femme, en un mot, n'est pas seulement pour l'artiste en général...la femelle de l'homme. C'est plutôt une divinité, un astre, qui préside à toutes les grâces de la nature condensées dans un seul être...Toute ce qui orne la femme, toute ce qui sert à illustrer sa beauté, fait partie d'elle-même; et les artistes qui sont particulièrement appliqués à l'étude de cet être énigmatique raffolent autant de tout le *mundus muliebris* que de la femme elle-même. La femme est sans doute une lumière, un regard, une invitation au bonheur, une parole quelquefois; mais elle est surtout une harmonie générale, non seulement dans son allure et les mouvements de ses membres, mais aussi dans les mousselines, les gazes, les vastes et chatoyantes nuées d'étoffes dont elle s'enveloppe, et qui sont comme les attributs et le piédestal de sa divinité.²⁴²

The 'spiritualisation' and idealisation of the feminine is at the core of the cycle of poems dedicated to Madame Sabatier (poems XL to XLVIII) in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Where the equation between woman and evil or Satan characterised the cycle of poems on the *femme fatale* dedicated to Jeanne Duval (poems XXII to XXXIV), many of which were discussed in the previous chapter, the equation here lies between woman and the Angel: the

²⁴² Charles Baudelaire, 'La Femme', *Le Peintre de la vie moderne, Oeuvres complètes*, *op. cit.* volume II, p. 713-714. Italics in original.

'dearest Goddess, being so pure and wise',²⁴³ the angel awakening due to a 'mystic vengeance'. The equation between the Ideal feminine and the angel occurs in almost every one of the poems in the Sabatier cycle as a symbol of the positive or spiritual feminine. The image of the Angel is a personification of the idea of the feminine as a spiritual force, and can thus be regarded as a succinct expression, or symbol, of the 'spiritualised' feminine.

The image of the angel, as the embodiment of a positive, sometimes transformative, quality of the feminine, was the subject of various Symbolist images, for example, Jean Delville's *Angel of Splendour*, discussed in the previous section, and Khnopff's *Un Ange* [Fig. 3]. Delville's angel is a splendid golden figure radiating an intense light from the region of the head. The figure is clothed in a thin golden garment which seems altogether insubstantial. The swirls of this garment around her body suggests the movement of flames, as though the figure were clothed in fire, which emphasises her incorporeal, spiritual nature. Moreover, the figure is slightly built with delicate hands and feet. Her face is gentle and delicately modeled and her expression is calm and peaceful which enhances her ethereal nature. Significantly, the angel's eyes are closed which, as will be indicated, is a characteristic motif of many representations of the positive feminine. This construction of the feminine contrasts in every way with Delville's *Idol of Perversity* [Fig. 2], described in Chapter One, which is a personification of the erotic, cruel and destructive character of the negative feminine. Delville's *Idol* is a being of darkness, sensuality and evil; his *Angel* on the contrary is a being of pure light and spirit and

²⁴³ Baudelaire 'The Spiritual Dawn' *FM XLVI*.

constitutes a significant example of the articulation of the spiritual feminine during the period.

Khnopff's angel is a standing figure dressed in a suit of armour. Similar to Delville's angel, the expression of Khnopff's figure is one of complete calm and repose. It too has closed eyes. Khnopff's angel is constructed in the syntax of the androgyne, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, which signifies the Ideal, and stands in command over the reclining tiger-female. The latter, as has already been indicated, was a typical motif referring to the realm of the sensual and material in Symbolist iconography. It will be suggested in the following chapter that Khnopff's work is a rendering of the complex philosophical relationship between Idealism and materialism articulated in particular in Schopenhauer's philosophy.

The opposition between the positive-Ideal and the negative-material is the subject, moreover, of Carlos Schwabe's painting 'Spleen and Ideal' which personifies this opposition in the form of a conflict between two female figures. The one winged 'angelic' figure forces herself from the clutches of the serpentine female form which seems to be attempting to drag the former beneath the water. Schwabe's title relates it directly to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, where 'Spleen and Ideal' is the title of the first eighty five poems and includes the cycles dedicated to Mme Sabatier and Jeanne Duval, in other words, the poem cycles dealing with the positive and negative feminine respectively. This motif of the winged female figure is usually a tacit expression of the image of the angel, of the spiritual feminine, and occurs furthermore in a work already referred to, namely, Schwabe's *The Marriage of the Muse and the Poet*. A final example worth indicating concerning the subject of the angel is William Degouve de Nuncque's *Angels in the Night*.

ii) *Solitude and Silence: Mysticism and the Ideal Feminine*

One of the important themes associated with the spiritual feminine in Symbolist art is the subject of silence. The theme of silence is either overtly expressed, in the title of the work or the gestures of the figures, or tacitly evoked in the delineation of the environment or setting in which the figures are described such as the interior or the forest. A prominent example of the type of work in which the theme is overtly alluded to is Khnopff's *Du Silence* [Fig. 9] of 1890. The composition of this work is straightforward with the focus on a standing female figure which fills up most of the format. The features of this figure are those of Khnopff's sister Marguerite which, as has already been indicated at the beginning of this chapter with regard to Khnopff's painting *Arum Lily*, personifies Khnopff's conception of the Ideal feminine. The facial expression of the figure is passive and distant. The lack of descriptions of details in the environment, apart from a lightly traced oval above the head of the figure, enhances the sense that the figure is removed from the this world and isolated in an abstract world, a conceptual world of the mind and the dream. The isolation of the feminine figure in an imaginary world of silence and quietude is, it will be indicated, a prominent characteristic of this aspect of the Ideal feminine.

The most striking feature of this work is the gesture of the figure pressing one finger to her lips. The same gesture is repeated in Odilon Redon's painting titled *Silence* of 1911 which represents the head and shoulders of a female figure, framed in an oval format, which presses two fingers held together against her lips. Lucien Levy-Dhurmer's pastel titled *Silence* (1895) represents the head and upper torso of a female figure wearing

a dark shroud over her head which partly conceals the face. The figure is placed in a nocturnal landscape beneath a star-lit sky reminiscent of Khnopff's *Un Ange*. In this work, the fore and middle fingers of the figure are apart and pressed against the corners of the mouth. Howe documents possible visual prototypes for this gesture in Khnopff's pastel, albeit a common human action, in the fresco by Fra Angelico of St Peter Martyr in the refectory of San Marco in Florence, in the etching *Silentium* (1890) by Edouard Manet and the tomb figure of *Silence* (1843) by the French Sculptor Antoine Préault in the cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris.²⁴⁴

The theme of silence was an important facet of Symbolist mysticism. Silence was regarded as the essential medium in which the life of the soul could be accessed and experienced. It is, as Howe suggests:

the condition of reverie, of prayer, of contemplation and of mystery. In silence one becomes aware of one's own consciousness, and of time and events which flow around one's still centre.²⁴⁵

It has been emphasised in the Introduction that the inner world of mystery and the mystical constituted the essential subject of artistic and poetic expression and comprised, moreover, the essential kernel around which Symbolist aesthetics revolved. This is what Mallarmé referred to as the 'sens mystérieux des aspects de l'existence'.²⁴⁶ This inner world of the mystical and the spiritual was frequently personified in the notion of the soul. This communion with the inner life through artistic activity implied an awakening to the life of the 'soul'. As for the Romantics, this notion of the soul was a principle tenet in

²⁴⁴ Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

²⁴⁵ Howe, *ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁴⁶ Mallarmé, 'Le Mystère dans les Lettres'. *loc. cit.*

Symbolist culture and formed an integral part of their aesthetic discourse, as Michaud observes, 'L'âme, c'est le mot-clé de l'époque'.²⁴⁷ The nature of the soul was never precisely defined but rather, articulated as the experience of subtle psychic states of spiritual or transcendental feeling, 'l'âme, n'est que nuances, sensations insaisissables'.²⁴⁸ The soul was the embodiment of the sense of mystery and mysticism, of the *Au-Delà*, the unknowable beyond and the infinite sought for by the Symbolists, in other words, of the Ideal itself. Albert Aurier saw the mysticism of the soul as the essential bulwark against the rampant tide of materialism of the nineteenth century:

it is mysticism that we need today, and it is mysticism alone that can save our society from brutalization, sensualism and utilitarianism. The most noble faculties of our soul are in the process of atrophying. In a hundred years we shall be brutes whose only ideal will be easy appeasement of bodily functions; by means of positive science we shall have returned to animality, pure and simple. We must react. We must recultivate in ourselves the superior qualities of the soul. We must become mystics again. We must learn to love, the source of all understanding.²⁴⁹

Moreover, the cultivation of the life of the soul was the task of the individual through spiritual and artistic activity.

Charles Morice wrote:

Etablir d'abord que l'Art est une reprise, par l'âme, de ses propres profondeurs, que l'âme s'y libère de toutes entraves pour la joie et pour l'intelligence du monde et elle-même: préciser ainsi l'atmosphère métaphysique de toute l'oeuvre...²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ Michaud, *Message*, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

²⁴⁸ Michaud, *ibid.*

²⁴⁹ G.-Albert Aurier, 'Essay on a new Method of Criticism', 1890-1893 in *Oeuvres posthumes de G.-Albert Aurier*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1893. Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1968, p. 88. Aurier's prophecy has a chilling truth to it, now exactly a century later.

²⁵⁰ Charles Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*, 1889, p. 367. Quoted in Michaud, *Documents*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Rimbaud was unequivocal in stating that the soul was the starting point of aesthetic activity, 'La première étude de l'homme qui veut être poète est sa propre connaissance, entière. Il cherche son âme, il l'inspecte, il la tente, l'apprend'.²⁵¹

The life of the soul, of spiritual awareness, was cultivated, moreover, in a state of silence and solitude. Morice wrote:

C'est cette solitude-là qu'il faut dans l'âme 'pour écouter Dieu'. Et en effet, de... Solitude... résulte aussitôt un sentiment d'illimitée puissance, qui est le conseil même de l'Infini; aussitôt l'âme acquiert la certitude de sa propre éternité dans cette solitude d'exception, et qu'il n'y a pas de mort comme il n'y a pas de naissance, et que la véritable est d'être un des centres conscients de la vibration infinie.²⁵²

The association between silence and the soul was pervasive in Symbolist art. George Rodenbach, the Belgian Symbolist poet wrote, 'my soul is alone and nothing influences it. It is like a glass enclosed in silence, completely devoted to its interior spectacle'.²⁵³ Moreover, Rodenbach regarded silence as a 'force that makes it possible to communicate with the unknown'.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Rimbaud, letter to Demeney, 15/v/1871. Quoted in Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

²⁵² Morice, *op. cit.*, p. 66. Emphasis in original. Of solitude, Baudelaire wrote:

Un gazetier philanthrope me dit que la solitude est mauvaise pour l'homme; et à l'appui de sa thèse, il cite, comme tous les incrédules, des paroles des Pères de l'Église.

Je sais que le Démon fréquente volontiers les lieux arides, et que l'Esprit de meurtre et de lubricité s'enflamme merveilleusement dans les solitudes. Mais il serait possible que cette solitude ne fût dangereuse que pour l'âme oisive et divagante qui la peuple de ses passions et de ses chimères.

Baudelaire, 'La Solitude', *Le Spleen de Paris (Petits poèmes en prose)*, XXIII, *Oeuvres Complètes, op. cit.*, p. 313.

²⁵³ George Rodenbach, 'Aquarium Mentale', *Mecure de France*, volume 17, March 1896, pp. 294. Quoted in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

²⁵⁴ Rodenbach, quoted in Goldwater, *Symbolism*, Penquin, London, 1979, p. 205.

Rodenbach's poem *Du Silence* (1888) was published as *Le Règne du Silence* in 1891. Howe has indicated that Khnopff's *Du Silence* relates overtly to Rodenbach's poem which evokes the tangible silence that pervades the Flemish country side constructed as a metaphor for the inner silence of the soul and mystery.²⁵⁵ In an incantatory passage from the poem, Rodenbach evokes the mystical silence of the Beguinage which shrouds the praying female figures:

Ah! vous êtes mes soeurs, les âmes qui vivez
 Dans ce doux nonchaloir des rêves mi-rêves
 Parmi l'isolment léthargique des villes
 Qui somnolent au long des rivières débiles;
 Ames dont le silence est un piété,
 Ames à qui le bruit fait mal; dont l'amour n'aime
 Que ce qui pouvait être et n'aura pas été;...

Ames comme des fleurs et comme des sourdines
 Autour de qui vont s'enroulant les angélus
 Comme autour des rouets la douceur de la laine!

Et vous aussi mes soeurs, vous qui n'êtes en peine
 Que d'un long chapalet bénit à dépêcher
 Et un doux béguinage à l'ombre d'un clocher,
 Oh! vous, mes Soeurs, - car c'est ce cher nom que l'Eglise
 M'enseigne a vous donner, soeurs pleines de douceurs,
 Dans ce halo de ligne où le front s'angélise,
 Oh! Vous qui m'êtes plus que pour d'autres des soeurs
 Chastes dans votre robe à plis qui se balance,
 O vous mes soeurs en Notre Mère, le Silence!²⁵⁶

Howe has indicated further sources for the mystical cult of silence during the Symbolist period which are worth mentioning here. Thomas Carlyle, the author of *Sartor Resartus* which had a significant influence on Symbolist thought, extolled silence as a new deity to whom the building of altars was proposed. Carlyle wrote:

The benignant efficacies of Concealment... Who shall speak or sing? *Silence and Secrecy!* Altars might still

²⁵⁵ Howe, *ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁵⁶ Georges Rodenbach, from *Le Règne du Silence* 1891. Quoted in Robert L. Delevoy *Symbolists and Symbolism*, Skira, New York, 1982, p. 118.

be raised to them (were this an altar building time) for universal worship. Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together... Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity... Thought will not work except in Silence...²⁵⁷

Balzac's novel *Seraphita* (1835), which was influential during the symbolist period especially in so far as it deals with the theme of the androgyne as a state of spiritual perfection, echoes Carlyle in lauding silence as an essential condition for the revelation of the Divine. Balzac writes, 'Silence and meditation are efficacious means of entering on this road; God always reveals Himself to the solitary and contemplative man'.²⁵⁸

Knopff's *Du Silence* can be interpreted in various ways following the above discussion. The image draws attention to the theme of silence in the title and in the gesture of the figure. In relation to the viewer, the figure expresses an injunction to be silent, not only as the essential state wherein it is possible to apprehend the inner life and the mystery of the soul, but also to guard the knowledge of this realm and to protect its defamation in the hands of the profane. It is a secret to be guarded and cultivated in private in the solitary communion with one's inner spiritual life.

The theme of silence and solitude is often evoked or suggested in Symbolist paintings especially those in which the feminine is articulated in specific environments such as interiors or in landscapes, especially the forest or near a lake or the sea. These settings, it should be emphasised from the outset, are less depictions of actual environments than metaphors for the inner

²⁵⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1832), Boston, 1897, p. 198. Quoted in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁵⁸ Honore de Balzac, *Seraphita* (1835), New York, 1976, p. 162-163. Quoted in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 87-88.

spiritual order of reality; they constitute, to adopt Rodenbach's phrase, a 'paysage de l'âme'.²⁵⁹

iii) '*Le Paysage de l'âme*'

a) *The Interior*

Xavier Mellery's charcoal and pen work, *Dream of the Evening* (1898) [Fig. 35], is a good example of the type of work which depicts the Ideal feminine in an interior of silence and mystery. The image is of a seated female figure which is in fact a statue, or more likely a plaster cast (which is more apparent in other works by the artist on the same subject) situated in an interior. The composition is simple and executed as a rough sketch rather than a finished drawing. The treatment of the subject in this way is highly atmospheric. The details of the figure and the bannister behind it are not sharply defined but merge with, and emerge from, the shadows around them. The figure is articulated in a suggestive environment of shadow and light, of silence and mystery. The title of the work draws attention to two important themes in Symbolist art, namely the dream and twilight. Evening or twilight was the favoured time of day during the period and pervades Symbolist imagery. Evening is the liminal point between day and night and mediates between them. The half-light and deep shadows of evening in which forms lose their distinctiveness and merge with each other or dissolve into the shadows is suggestive of the inner world of mystery and the dream. Many Symbolist works are noted for a distinctive technique which attempts to suggest this state by reproducing the effect of twilight. Many works can

²⁵⁹ From *La Régne du silence: La Vie des Chambres, II* Quoted in Sarah Burns, 'A Symbolist Soulscape: Fernand Khnopff's "I Lock My Door Upon Myself" *Arts Magazine*, volume 55, January 1981, pp. 80-89, p. 82.

be cited in which there is a deliberate tendency to blur the edges of forms which, as a result, merge with each other and their surroundings. This is especially evident in the works of Mellery, Khnopff, Redon, Previatti, Lévy-Dhurmer, Fantin-Latour and Alfred Kubin. This approach to visual expression could be seen as a formal response to the Symbolist technique of *suggestion*. As already indicated in the Introduction, this method aimed at expressing the ineffable, the inner state of the soul and the mystery of spirit. Suggestion was often associated with the life of the soul, Mallarmé wrote that suggestion was, '...le rêve. C'est le parfait usage de ce mystère qui constitue le symbole: évoquer petit un objet pour montrer un état d'âme'.²⁶⁰ Charles Morice wrote that, 'La suggestion est le langage des correspondances et des affinités de l'âme et de la nature'.²⁶¹

The idea of the dream alluded to in Mellery's image suggests another important theme in Symbolist art. The importance of the notion of *le Rêve* to Symbolist aesthetics has been well documented.²⁶² The dream is a twilight state which mediates between the worlds of the real and the abstract. The dream image partakes of elements of waking conscious reality but reconstructs these into a new order of reality with its own laws of time and space. It is this combination of the real and the abstract peculiar to the dream which artists of the period attempted to emulate. Khnopff's art in many ways comes closest to achieving this ideal. In the discussion at the end of the Introduction, it

²⁶⁰ Mallarmé, *Réponse à une Enquête*, *op. cit.* Quoted in Michaud, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

²⁶¹ Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l'heure*. *op. cit.* Quoted in Michaud, *ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁶² Vide H. R. Rookmaker, *Gauguin and Nineteenth Century Art Theory*. Amsterdam, 1972; A. G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France, 1885-1900*. Oxford, 1950 pp. 85-102 and Howe, *op. cit.* pp. 105-116.

was indicated to what extent Khnopff's *Memories* articulated this combination of the real and the imaginary, or the abstract. This is also evident in his *I Lock My Door upon Myself* [Fig. 6] which will be discussed in detail below.

Moreover, to the extent that the dream is seen to communicate knowledge of the *Au-Delà*, the realm of the Ideal, it is seen as the *medium* between the realm of the real and the mystical. René Ghil wrote, 'Le réel et suggestif symbol d'où, palpitante par le rêve, en son intégrité nue se lèvera l'Idée prime et dernière, ou Vérité'.²⁶³ To this extent it is also seen as the reflection of the ideal state of spirit. Mauclaire wrote, 'Ce que nous appellons le rêve n'est pas non plus une lueur en dehors de nous. C'est l'Etat primordial de notre esprit'.²⁶⁴ The dream also denoted a transcendent state through which the realm of the supernatural and spiritual was revealed. Earlier in the century, Gérard de Nerval wrote:

Le rêve est une seconde vie. Je n'ai percer sans frémir ces portes d'ivoire ou de corne qui nous séparent du monde invisible. Les premiers instants du sommeil sont l'image de la mort: un engourdissement nébuleux saisit notre pensée, et nous ne pouvons déterminer l'instant précis où le *moi*, sous une autre forme, continue l'oeuvre de l'existence. C'est un souterrain vague, qui s'éclaire peu à peu et où se dégagent de l'ombre et de la nuit les pâles figures gravement immobiles qui habitent le séjour des limbes. Puis le tableau se forme, une clarté nouvelle illumine

²⁶³ René Ghil, *Traité du Verbe*. Quoted in Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

²⁶⁴ Mauclaire, *Eleusis*, 1894, p. 62. Quoted in Lehmann, *ibid.* Further he wrote:

Ce que nous nommons le rêve n'est que l'état idéal de notre esprit, et nous sommes continuellement sur le point d'y atteindre - mais nous n'y atteindrons que par l'abolition complète des choses inharmonieuses et des circonstances malavisées, et il nous faudrait mourir.

Ibid, p. 64. Quoted in Lehmann, *ibid.*

et fait jouer ces apparitions bizarres: - le monde des Esprits s'ouvre pour nous.²⁵⁵

To evoke the atmosphere and twilight state of the dream was a primary objective in Symbolist imagery and is pervasive in works which deal with the mystical or Ideal feminine.

Mellery's *Dream of Evening* consciously invokes these important themes of the Symbolist period. Another striking work by Mellery which is concerned with the construction of the feminine in an oneiric twilight interior of solitude and silence is *The Soul of Things* (c. 1890). The focus of the composition is a statue of a seated female figure elevated on a narrow pedestal. The figure, dressed in a simple garment with an open neck and short sleeves, appears to be asleep; her head is tilted back and her one arm hangs to one side while the other lies across her lap over a viola. A flight of stairs twists around the figure from the

²⁵⁵ Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*, in the anthology, *Nerval, le Rêve et la vie*. Hachette, 1955, p. 203. This type of dream which represented the supernatural side of existence, was termed by Baudelaire *hiéroglyphique* as opposed to *le rêve naturel*:

Les rêves de l'homme sont de deux classes. Les uns, pleins de sa vie ordinaire, de ses préoccupations, de ses désirs, de ses vices, se combinent d'une façon plus ou moins bizarre avec les objets entrus dans la journée, qui se sont indiscrètement fixés sur la vaste toile de sa mémoire. Voilà le rêve naturel; il est l'homme lui-même. Mais l'autre espèce de rêve! le rêve absurde, imprévu, sans rapport ni connexion avec le caractère, la vie et les passions du dormeur! ce rêve, que j'appellerai hiéroglyphique, représente évidemment le côté surnaturel de la vie, et c'est justement parce qu'il est absurde que les anciens l'ont cru divin. Comme il est inexplicable par les causes naturelles, ils lui ont attribué une cause extérieure à l'homme; et encore aujourd'hui, sans parler des oneiromanciens, il existe une école philosophique qui voit dans les rêves de ce genre tantôt un reproche, tantôt un conseil; en somme, un tableau symbolique et moral, engendré dans l'esprit même de l'homme qui sommeille. C'est un dictionnaire qu'il faut étudier, une langue dont les sages peuvent obtenir la clef.

Baudelaire, 'Le Théâtre de Séraphin', *Le Poème du Hachisch* from *Les Paradis Artificiel. Oeuvres Complètes, op. cit.,* volume I, pp. 408-409.

bottom left to top right. The interior space is largely empty apart from the statue and two paintings on the walls. The surfaces and forms in this work are articulated in the same grainy texturing already noted in *The Staircase*. As a result, the edges of the forms are similarly blurred and insubstantial. The oneiric atmosphere of this work is enhanced through the use of contrasting areas of light and deep shadow and darkness. The syntax of this work suggests that this is an expression not so much of a real interior but rather, the interior of the mind, of the soul. The title of the work suggests as much since it probably refers to the scene as a whole as much as to the statue of the female figure. The sleeping figure suggests the theme of the dream and the musical instrument that of art. These suggest an association between the principle themes of sleep, dream, art and the feminine (as muse) which is suggestive in the light of the discussion of these subjects above. The actual association between the feminine and the soul which is ambiguously inferred in the title is also suggestive. The concept of the feminine as soul symbol was current during the Symbolist period as well as in English Pre-Raphaelite painting. Sarah Burns has examined this aspect of Symbolist art with particular regard to the work of Khnopff.²⁶⁶ A direct connection between the feminine and the soul is suggested further in Odilon Redon's *The Soul of Mystery* (1897) [Fig. 37] which is a pastel of a woman's head with large, widely spaced blue eyes and adorned with sparkling jewelry.

One of the most striking representations of the image of the mystical feminine in an interior environment of isolation, solitude and silence is Fernand Khnopff's *I Lock My Door Upon*

²⁶⁶ Sarah Burns, 'A Symbolist Soulscape: Fernand Khnopff's "I Lock My Door Upon Myself,"' *Arts Magazine*, volume 55, January 1981, pp. 80-89, p. 86.

Myself (1981) [Fig. 6].²⁶⁷ The complex structure and hermetic symbolism of this work makes it one of the most enigmatic renderings of the theme on the feminine as a symbol of transformation and inner transcendence. The title of the work is derived from a poem by Christina Rossetti, 'Who Shall Deliver Me?', in the lines:

All others are outside myself;
I lock my door and bar them out,
The turmoil, tedium, gad-about

I Lock my door upon myself,
And start self-purged upon the race
That all must run! Death runs apace.²⁶⁸

Although Khnopff frequently resorted to literary sources for titles of his works, his paintings are seldom mere illustrations of those works. Literary texts are invoked rather as symbolic references and not the source for the visual narrative of his images.²⁶⁹ The focus of Khnopff's image is the striking figure

²⁶⁷ This work has been extensively examined by several authors, the most prominent being Sarah Burns' article already cited, 'A Symbolist Soulscape: Fernand Khnopff's "I Lock My Door Upon Myself,"' *op. cit.*; Jeffrey Howe's, 'Dreams and Death' in *op. cit.*, chapter 7 and Leslie D. Morrissey's 'Isolation and the Imagination: Fernand Khnopff's "I Lock My Door Upon Myself,"' *Arts Magazine*, volume 53, December to February 1979-79, pp. 94-97 hereafter cited as 'Isolation and the Imagination'.

²⁶⁸ Christina Rossetti, "Who Shall Deliver Me?," *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, London, 1906, p. 238. Quoted in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

²⁶⁹ This characteristic has been noted by Morrissey: 'Exploration of Symbolic States of Mind in Fernand Khnopff's Works of the 1880's' *Arts Magazine*, volume 53, December to February 1978-1979, pp. 88-92, pp. 89-90, (hereafter cited as 'Symbolic States of Mind'). An early example of this tendency is seen in Khnopff's *Après Flaubert: La Tentation de Saint-Antoine* (1884) which alludes to *The Temptation of St. Anthony* by Flaubert although void of any reference to the narrative of the author's novel. This practise clearly exasperated the bourgeois demand for recognisable links in narrative content between image and text. This exasperation was expressed by a contemporary critic Pierre Gervais who wrote:

J'ai lu Flaubert, mais je ne me rappelle pas y avoir
rencontre quelque chose qui ressemble à ce rebus

of a woman with pale almost colourless eyes and an extraordinary head of russet hair leaning her head on the backs of her hands and seated behind a large black-draped surface. The figure is situated in a shallow and ambiguous space. In front of her are three day lilies unevenly spaced across the format and in various phases of bloom. Behind her the panel wall is divided into three main sections: to the right, a picture window looking out to a gloomy city with a small figure shrouded in black. Just to the right of centre is a shelf between two vertical strips with a sculpture of the head of Hypnos, God of sleep, facing slightly to the right with a poppy next to its face. To the left of this section is a wall with round mirrors and directly behind the figure there is what appears to be a passage. The predominant colour of the work is sombre brown which is punctuated with the bright orange of the lilies, the blue tip of the wing of Hypnos and the yellow panels on the left-hand wall. The format of the work is long and narrow, the length of which is almost twice the height (72 by 140cm). This compressed horizontal format is frequently used by Khnopff, notably in *Près de la Mer* [Fig. 48] and *Art or the Caresses* [Fig. 12]. The format itself suggests that this is not a view into physical reality or nature, it is not a picture window but rather a view into an entirely different order of reality, of the imagination and the mind.

The spacial configuration of the work is ambivalent and not easy to resolve especially that between the figure and the rear wall. The rhythmic divisions of the rear wall into vertical and

pirotechnique parti sur un fond noir rayé d'un homme barbu, d'une sorte de divinité indoue delayée dans de l'or moulu. Gervais, 'A MM Les Vingtistes', *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, volume 26, number 3, February 1884, p. 17. Quoted in Morrissey, *ibid.*, p. 92 note 11.

Howe has also indicated this aspect of Khnopff's art, *vide op. cit.*, pp. 62 *et seq.*

horizontal panels emphasises the flatness of the format. The relative lack of diagonal motifs and orthogonals compresses the picture plane creating an airless, claustrophobic effect. This ambiguity of the interior space is recapitulated in the spacial configuration of the passage behind the figure which appears at the same time to recede and to be flat; the way out of this claustral environment is in fact a dead end. The equivocal delineation of space in this work enhances the sense that it is a view into a different order of reality - reminiscent of the dream and the mind.²⁷⁰

The dominant vertical divisions framing the head of Hypnos divides the area behind the figure into three sections: one containing the head of the statue; one to the left of this including the passage and the panelled walls with the round mirrors; and the area to the right of the statue depicting the exterior view. These divisions correspond to the three lilies in the foreground, one placed in each of the partitions. The lilies are in various stages of bloom and from left to right each corresponds to a stage in the metamorphosis of the flower from blossom to full flower to withered bloom. This can be interpreted as an iconic suggestion of the stages of life from birth to death as well as time; as past, present and future. Morrissey and Burns both point to the semantic relationship between the lilies and objects depicted in the rear divisions.²⁷¹

The central iconographic element in the work is the head of Hypnos. Khnopff frequently depicted this head in other works

²⁷⁰ It may be worth noting that the spacial paradoxes in the drawings of Escher are similarly evocative of the spacial ambiguities of the imagination and the irrational experienced in dreams and other states of heightened awareness.

²⁷¹ Morrissey, 'Isolation and the Imagination', *op. cit.*, p. 95; Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

notably, *Une Aile Bleue* (1894), and *Blanc Noir et Or* (1901). Hypnos is closely associated with the themes of sleep, dreams and death. In classical mythology, Hypnos, offspring of Night is twin brother to Thanatos, god of Death, and these two are often depicted as a pair.²⁷² Burns has indicated the significant role played by Hypnos as the father of dreams and points out further that as a sepulchral ornament, Hypnos denotes eternal sleep.²⁷³ It has already been pointed out in this and the previous chapter that dreams and death denote a transcendental state and a form of liberation from the mundane and earthly, the material order of reality. Sleep can be personified as the guide to the world of dreams and by extension to the realm of death. This has been noted as one of the central themes of Khnopff's painting. Burns writes:

the head of Hypnos alludes not only to the final liberation of the physical self through death, but also to the transcendence of self through dreams that unleash the soul to roam in a timeless Beyond.²⁷⁴

The theme of death is also suggested in the scene through the window which depicts a solitary black-shrouded figure in the quiet and deserted streets of a medieval city. Howe has discussed the symbolism of the city in Khnopff's painting and indicates the importance of the city of Bruges as visual metaphor for many of the mystical aspirations in Khnopff's art and was associated, further, with the theme of death.²⁷⁵ This city was the central symbol of Georges Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte*, illustrated

²⁷² Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

²⁷³ Burns, *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ Burns, *ibid.* Further, Morrissey observes:
Like silence, sleep can also be the pathway to death; the death involved here is, though, that of the world outside... The exterior self must die for the interior self to survive.

Morrissey, 'Isolation and the Imagination', *op. cit.*, p. 96.

²⁷⁵ Vide Howe, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-38.

with a frontispiece by Khnopff. In the novel, the dead city of Bruges is equated with the dead wife of the protagonist:

A mysterious equation established itself....Bruges was his dead wife. His dead wife was Bruges. Both unified themselves in a parallel destiny. It was indeed *Bruges-la-Morte*, with its abandoned stone quays woven into an idealisation of melancholy by the cold arteries of the canals which had long ceased to feel the pulsation of the sea.²⁷⁶

In this, Rodenbach tacitly alludes to the theme of the feminine and death discussed in the previous chapter.

Another important motif, symbolically connected with interior realm, which is featured in this work is the mirror. Two round mirrors are depicted behind the figure and the reflection of casement windows is seen in the one. The mirror is an important motif in Symbolist art and poetry and also occurs frequently in Khnopff's images notably in *Mon coeur pleure d'autrefois* (1888-89) [Fig. 47], *The Secret-Reflection* (1902) [Delevoy, 1979:174] and *La Conscience* (1905).²⁷⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the rich diversity and complexity of the image of the mirror in the art of the *fin-de-siècle*. The following is relevant to the present discussion. The mirror is

²⁷⁶ George Rodenbach *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892), translated by Thomas Duncan, London, 1903, p. 88. Quoted in Howe, *ibid.*, p. 31. Rodenbach also suggests an analogy between the city and the soul which is significant in the context of the present discussion of the interior as a symbol of the soul. Referring to Bruges, Rodenbach writes:

Everywhere the mute analogies suggest themselves. A reciprocal penetration existed between the soul and the inanimate things that surrounded it. Part of our being enters into them, whilst theirs unconsciously passes within us. Towns in particular have a distinctive personality of their own....Each town represents a condition of the soul which emanates imperceptibly into the atmosphere.

Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, *ibid.*, pp. 256-257. quoted in Howe, *ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Howe devotes a chapter to the image of the mirror in his study on the iconography of Khnopff's art. *Vide Howe, op. cit.*, pp. 93-103.

often used as a motif of self-discovery or self-revelation and is thus regarded as an instrument of introspection. This examination of one's inner consciousness, of the soul and spirit is, as has been suggested in the above discussion, a central aspect of Symbolist aesthetic activity. Khnopff's *La Conscience* depicts a young woman gazing at her reflection in a mirror. An inscription beneath the signature reads: 'La Conscience. le (sic) reflet de soi-même en plus beau'.²⁷⁹ The mirror is also the *medium* in which (spiritual) consciousness is reflected and is associated with the myth of Narcissus and the reflection in water - both of which were important motifs during the *fin-de-siècle*.²⁷⁹ The mirror can be viewed as a bridge between two realities, in Symbolist language between the real and the transcendental in as much as it reflects the interior world of mystery and the spiritual. George Rodenbach described the mirror as '...une fenêtre\Ouvert à l'infini'.²⁸⁰ Like the dream, love and Beauty, art and indeed the feminine itself, the mirror is a symbol of mediation between the two orders of reality, between the material and the metaphysical. Further aspects of the mirror symbol will be dealt with in the following chapter where it will be argued that the mirror is an agent of synthesis between self

²⁷⁸ Howe, *ibid.* p. 96.

²⁷⁹ The theme populated many paintings and literary works during the period including Andre Gide, Paul Valery and Jean Lorraine. Howe writes, 'In Symbolist Mythology, the artist became Narcissus, with art as his mirror'. *Ibid.*, p. 97. Cirlot indicates that the mirror

is a symbol of the imagination - or of consciousness - in its capacity to reflect the formal reality of the visible world. It has also been related to thought...[and]...is the instrument of self-contemplation as well as the reflection of the universe. This links mirror symbolism with water as a reflector and with the Narcissus myth: the cosmos appears as a huge Narcissus regarding his own reflections in the human consciousness.

Cirlot, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²⁸⁰ George Rodenbach, 'La Vie des Chambres, IX' in *Le Règne du silence*. Quoted in Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

and spiritual 'other' and is thus a symbol of the principle of androgyny.

Burns has noted that the mirror was also regarded by the Symbolists as an instrument which reflected the past and is thus associated with time and memory. Burns notes, 'Not only are they metaphorical portals of spiritual escape, but they are also repositories of memories and shrines of reverie'.²⁹¹ In LeRoy's poem *Mon coeur pleur d'autrefois* (1889) memories of the past are reflected, 'Dans le miroir de mes souvenirs\ Elle toute, un fantôme très pâle\ Apparaît...'²⁹² Rodenbach compared the soul to a mirror reflecting memories, 'Aux miroirs de mon Ame un souvenir se site'.²⁹³ The lilies in front of the mirrors which are in bud, suggest youth and the past.

Khnopff's equivocal silent interior with its ambiguous spaces and hermetic symbolic motifs - which refer consistently to the themes of sleep, dreams, death and transcendence - would suggest that this work is an intensely private portrait of an inner reality, of the soul and mystery. It is constructed in the somewhat recondite visual syntax of allusion and suggestion which characterises the art of this period.²⁹⁴ The feminine figure is

²⁹¹ Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁹² Leroy, 'Crépuscule d'amour', *Mon coeur pleur d'autrefois*. Quoted in Burns, *ibid.*

²⁹³ Rodenbach, 'Paysage de ville, X' *Le Règne du silence*. Quoted in Burns *ibid.*

²⁹⁴ Symbolist art, poetry and painting alike, was often criticised for its obscurity and lack of accessibility. On the one hand, the artists of the period flaunted this tendency as a snook cocked against the bourgeois demand for realism and accessibility (*cf.* the Introduction on anarchy and rebellion). On the other hand, obscurity was seen as an essential element in poetic expression as a means to evoke the unknowable and ineffable which constituted the essential subject of their art. Mallarmé wrote:

-Nous approchons ici, dis-je au maître, d'une grosse objection que j'avais à vous faire... L'obscurité!

intrinsic to this world and as such serves as a delineation of the inner transcendental feminine, the Ideal mythic feminine.²⁸⁵

Burns notes:

I Lock My Door Upon Myself represents no ordinary woman, no ordinary space, no reassuringly ordinary furniture, even though all of these are transparently disguised in quasi-realistic genre format. Rather each component in the composition serves an emblematic function. The sum of these parts symbolises the spiritual voyage of the inner self.²⁸⁶

b) *The Forest and the Sea*

The themes of silence, mystery and transcendence are also evident in works in which the spiritualised feminine is set in the landscape. The settings most frequently depicted are the forest, a lake or the sea. Significant examples of this association are found in the work of Alphonse Osbert, for example, *Songs of the*

-C'est, en effet, également dangereux, me répond-il, soit que l'obscurité vienne de l'insuffisance du lecteur, ou de celle du poète... Mais c'est tricher que d'éluder ce travail. Que si un être d'une intelligence moyenne, et d'une préparation littéraire insuffisante, ouvre par hasard un livre ainsi fait et prétend en jouir, il y a malentendu, il faut remettre les choses à leur place. Il doit y avoir toujours énigme en poésie et c'est le but de la littérature, - il n'y en a pas d'autres, - d'évoquer les objets.

Mallarmé, *Réponse à une Enquête* (1891). Quoted in Michaud, *Documents, op. cit.*, p. 100, emphasis in original.

²⁸⁵ Burns argues that the figure in Khnopff's painting is a symbol of the soul:

She may be regarded as the objectively conceived heroine of the silent and motionless spiritual drama unfolding within the psychic spaces of the painting. Given Khnopff's predilection for complexity, however, one may reasonably suppose that the woman is the soul itself. In that sense she represents the *anima* figure: the artist's symbolic self-projection from which emanate thoughts that materialise magically objects of symbolist decor.

Ibid., p. 86.

²⁸⁶ Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

Night (1896) [Fig. 40]. Maurice Denis' *The Muses* (1893), Emile Bernard's *Madelaine in the Bois d'Amour* (1888) [Delevoy, 1979:81], Edvard Munch's *The Voice*, William Nunoques de Gouve's *Angels in the Night* and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes' *The Sacred Grove* (c.1884-1889) [Delevoy, 1979:66-67] are further examples of this theme. The forest, in particular, is traditionally regarded as a sacred precinct wherein the rites of mystery are enacted.²⁸⁷ The forest is also traditionally associated with the feminine. Cirlot writes:

Forest-symbolism is complex, but it is connected at all levels with the symbolism of the female principle or of the Great Mother. The forest is the place where vegetable life thrives and luxuriates, free from any control or cultivation. And since its foliage obscures the light of the sun, it is therefore regarded as opposed to the sun's power and as a symbol of the earth.²⁸⁸

In other words, the forest can be seen as 'vessel' in which the fecundity of nature operates in characteristic cycles of birth, growth and decay which relates it to the maternal order of the feminine.

The motif of the feminine in the forest is an important theme in the work of Alphonse Osbert. On the whole Osbert's paintings are of a different type of Symbolism to those of, for example, Khnopff. Khnopff's work is on the extreme of cerebral hermeticism; Osbert's paintings appeal more to *feeling* and constitute therefore more of an intuitive mysticism.

The striking articulation of the feminine situated in a wood or forest in Osbert's work is characteristic of a particular attitude towards the ideality of the feminine during the *fin-de-siècle* which has been the subject of the present chapter. From

²⁸⁷ Vide Cirlot, *op.cit.* p. 112.

²⁸⁸ Cirlot, *ibid.*

an early diptych, *Fraîcheur matinale et Mystère du soir*, representing two large nude female figures in a landscape, his art was directed towards the articulation of the mystical feminine. Blumstein has noted that this work marked the birth of his Symbolist styled art: '*Fraîcheur matinale et Mystère du soir* marque les intentions nouvelles du peintre qui délaisse toutes les préoccupations envers la matérialité extérieure pour ne s'attacher qu'à la psychologie de la nature et de la femme'.²⁸⁹ The sense of silence, mystery and the dream, already stressed as fundamental motifs associated with the spiritual feminine, were important elements in Osbert's attitude towards art and beauty, couched in the syntax of a pantheistic mysticism. Osbert wrote:

Je conçois l'art comme une religion de la beauté, et l'évocateur des pensées hautes et sereines ouvertes à l'intelligence de l'homme, en face des splendeurs de la nature, le mystère des bois, des eaux, des cieux. L'art vit seulement d'harmonies... Il doit être l'évocateur du mystère, un calme solitaire dans la vie, comme la prière... en silence. Le silence qui contient toutes les harmonies...²⁹⁰

Osbert's conception of art as a religion of beauty probably derived from the aesthetic ideals of Joseph Péladan. Péladan's aesthetic ideals, which will be examined in closer detail in the following chapter, emphasised the expression of the spiritual and the Ideal through art. Osbert exhibited his work at all six of Péladan's Salons which took place between 1892 to 1897 and it is probably Péladan's thinking which informed his ideas on mysticism and the occult and the mystical nature of the feminine.²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Neil Blumstein 'Alphonse Osbert: Le peintre symboliste et son monde', *L'Oeil*, number 405, April 1989, pp. 46-51, p. 47.

²⁹⁰ Alphonse Osbert, Letter of the Artist, cited in Blumstein, *ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁹¹ Vide Blumstein, *ibid.*, p. 221.

Osbert's images are characteristically painted in pale shades of blue or violet, colours frequently used during the period to express the interior world of silence and the dream. The image of the forest was particularly significant for Osbert as a sacred precinct, a zone evoking the mysterious aspects of the world. Blumstein has observed the significance of the image of the forest in Osbert's paintings:

La forêt renferme le mystère de l'univers et son ombre bleue domine l'époque symboliste, toute comme l'oeuvre d'Osbert qui évoque bien la grandeur religieuse des bois. Les fûts des arbres ont la noblesse des collones d'un temple, et la forêt vierge devient ainsi sanctuaire, site de rites mystico-religieux. L'hermétisme de ce monde est encore renforcé par l'épaisse végétation qui, souvent, entourne le lac ou la clairière.²⁹²

Le Lyrisme dans la forêt (undated) depicts three feminine figures standing around a lake in a clearing of a forest. Two of the figures are holding lyres, one seated in the distance and the other standing hieratically in the foreground while the third leans against a tree. The features of the figures are indistinct. They have an ethereal intangible quality about them - an incorporeal angelicism which situates them in a different order of reality, of the dream or vision. This is a characteristic of many of Osbert's depictions of the feminine. A significant characteristic of Osbert's work is that the scenes he depicts are invariably set in the twilight of evening or dawn. The significance of twilight and evening in Symbolist art has already been noted. The liminal intermediary state of evening is evoked in subtle shades or soft golden yellow. In this twilight glow, forms lose their volume and dissolve in the shadows. It has already been noted that this effect is exploited in many Symbolist images as an allusion to the twilight obscurity of the interior mystical consciousness, the expression of which was the

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

essential subject of Symbolist aesthetic activity. A further point worth noting is the season depicted in this work. The autumnal setting of Osbert's painting is also characteristic of his art, and indeed many Symbolist landscapes. As much as evening mediates between day and night, so autumn mediates between summer and winter. It too is a liminal state; between the generation and growth of summer and the death or dormancy of life during winter and thus serves as a metaphor for the twilight state of reverie and the dream which mediates between consciousness and the spirit. Blumstein has noted that the landscape and the subtle shades in which it is rendered in Osbert's work suggests and evokes the interior landscape of the soul as well as being a symbol, or correspondence, which mediates between the nature and spirit.²⁹³

Osbert's *Chants de la nuit* (1896) [Fig. 40] is a large canvas depicting over a dozen female figures dressed in long white classical gowns, most with lyres, standing silently around a lake at the edge of a forest behind which rises the moon. The image suggests a secret rite of the feminine enacted in a landscape of silence and mystery. The anachronistic costume and the antique musical instruments enhance the sense of nostalgia for the idyllic and the ideal of the past.²⁹⁴ This yearning for the past

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁹⁴ The lyre is a prominent symbol in the art of the period the meaning of which, like most symbolic objects encountered in Symbolist imagery, is polyvalent. The instrument is associated with the legend of Orpheus which was frequently depicted during this period, notably by Moreau and Delville. Blumstein has made some observations on the significance of this image in Osbert's art:

La lyre figure très souvent dans les tableaux comme attribut, posée par terre ou tenue à la main, mais jamais en tant qu'instrument de musique dont on se sert. Elle a valeur symbolique multiple. Le signe d'une religion panthéiste, de communion avec toutes les splendeurs de l'Univers, elle est également l'emblème de l'inspiration, de l'harmonie et de la beauté. Cet instrument rappelle

which is characteristic of Symbolist art and poetry betrays a sense of loss of the spiritual perfection of a Golden Age of beauty and purity, or in Symbolist terms, the realm of the Ideal. Osbert's representations of the Ideal feminine, as seen in this and other works by the artist, are invariably stylised; the figures are immobile and silent standing or seated in hieratic poses reminiscent of Classical sculpture. The quiet melancholic atmosphere that surrounds these classical feminine forms was noted by the contemporary French writer Léonce Bénédite:

...Les Muses représentent... tout ce qui est beau dans la vie; elles sont la quintessence même de la vie. C'est pourquoi elles sont douces et mélancolique; car leur être n'est exprimé de la vie que par la douleur. Elles ont une grâce un peu résignée à leur sourire, car elles savent que la vie est triste, mais elles nous disent que le rêve est permis.²⁹⁵

The mystery of the feminine embodied in *Chants de la Nuit* is encountered in Schuré's work in passages describing the procession of white robed female initiates during the celebration of the Mysteries of Dionysus who are described as, 'those white shadows which walk in long lines beneath the poplars',²⁹⁶ which seems to parallel closely the figures in Osbert's painting. This spiritual, or 'muse'-like character, of the feminine in Osbert's work has been noted by Blumstein.²⁹⁷

Another favoured setting for the spiritualised feminine in Osbert's work is near to the sea. The sea, like the forest as well as the lake and still water generally, is traditionally

aussi Orphée, et par cela les souffrances de toute créateur, avec son art comme seul moyen d'expression.
Blumstein, *ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁹⁵ Bénédite Léonce, 'Art et Décoration', Paris, 1900, cited in Blumstein, *ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁹⁶ Schuré, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

²⁹⁷ Blumstein, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

associated with the feminine.²⁹⁸ In the poem titled *Funérailles* Jean Moréas invokes the maternal sea:

Et j'irai le long de la mer éternelle
 Qui bave et gémit en les roches concaves,
 En tordant sa queue en les roches concaves;
 J'irai tout le long de la mer éternelle.

Je viendrai déposer, ô mer maternelle,
 Parmi les varechs et parmi les épaves,
 Mer rêves et mon orgueil, mornes épaves,
 Pour que tu les berces, ô mer maternelle.²⁹⁹

Osbert's *Hymn to the Sea* (1893) [Fig. 38] and *Classical Evening* (1903) [Fig. 39] are striking renderings of the association between the mystical feminine and the sea. *Hymn to the Sea* depicts a single female figure standing next to the sea with a lyre cradled in one arm and her other arm stretched in front of her in the direction of the water which she faces. The entire work is bathed in the gentle silence of dusk. The dreamy meditative silence of this work is further evoked in *Classical Evening* which depicts four classically draped female figures starrng into the shimmering glow of the sun as it sinks beneath the horizon. Both these works are imbued with an almost supernatural serenity and the mystery of the unknown. Blumstein captures the sense of this symbol in writing:

La zone aquatique unit et équilibre le ciel et la terre. Immobile et immuable, l'eau est un modèle de calme et de silence. Près d'elle la gravité poétique s'approfondit. Un élément de repos pour les muses, elle fascine leur regard, tout comme le ciel, qui représente un autre aspect de l'immatérialité et de l'éternité.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ This association is as ancient as mythology itself and unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to explore to any degree. Reference is made to Neumann's *The Origins and History of Consciousness* and *The Great Mother*, *op. cit.*

²⁹⁹ Jean Moréas, 'Funérailles', *Les Cantilènes*. Cited in *Le Symbolisme dans les Collections du Petit Palais*, Musée du Petit Palais, 21 octobre 1988 - 19 février 1989, p. 100.

³⁰⁰ Blumstein, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

The preceding section has concentrated on the Ideal or spiritualised feminine as a personification of the inner realm of mystery and the mystical. The settings of the feminine, it has been stressed, is symbolic; whether in interiors or in landscapes, the environment and figure of the feminine serves as a vehicle referring not to the natural order of reality, which is overtly suggested, but rather the Ideal order or metaphysical world. The language of suggestion, evocation and allusion, are part of the system of communication through symbols or *correspondences* which, it has been stressed here and in the Introduction, constitutes the essential form of visual and poetic communication in Symbolist art. Whether in the hermetically complicated harmony of emblems and symbols as in the work of Khnopff, or the poetically evocative style of Mellery and Osbert, the works allude, albeit in seemingly diverse ways, to the abstruse and complex dimension of the *Au-Delâ* the imperceptible and intangible world of the mystical unconscious. In all these works, there is a common language of silence, solitude (even in Osbert's groups of figures) and the dream which are the distinguishing characteristics of the representation of the Ideal feminine in Symbolist art.

iv) The Symbol of the Veiled Feminine

One of the more enigmatic motifs associated with the Ideal feminine in Symbolist art is the symbol of the veil. This, it will be argued in the present section, is associated with the aspect of the Ideal feminine as symbol of transformation or initiation in so far as the veil is emblematic of the notion of concealment, of arcane or mystical knowledge in the hermetic and esoteric tradition.

The motif of the veil is also associated with the tradition of the unknown feminine which is the source of higher knowledge. This relates to the theme found especially in Romantic poetry of the feminine as muse or source of inspiration as in, for example, Shelley's poem *Alastor* which describes a visitation in a dream by the veiled muse of inspiration:

A vision on his sleep
 There came, a dream of hopes that never yet
 Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid
 Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
 Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
 Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,
 Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held
 His inmost sense suspended in its web...
 Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme...
 Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,
 Herself a poet.³⁰¹

Paul Verlaine's poem *Mon Rêve familial* is a striking expression of the unknown feminine from the *fin-de-siècle*:

Je fais souvent ce rêve étrange et pénétrant
 D'une femme inconnue, et que j'aime, et qui m'aime,
 Et qui n'est, chaque fois, ni tout à fait la même
 Ni tout à fait une autre, et m'aime et me comprend.

Car elle me comprend, et mon cœur, transparent
 Pour elle seule, hélas! cesse d'être un problème
 Pour elle seule, et les moiteurs de mon front blême,
 Elle seule les sait rafraîchir, en pleurant.

Est-elle brune, blonde ou rousse? - Je l'ignore.
 Et son nom? Je me souviens qu'il est doux et sonore
 Comme ceux des aimés que la Vie exila.

Son regard est pareil au regard des statues,
 Et pour sa voix, loitane, et calme, et grave, elle a
 L'inflexion des voix chères qui sont tuées.³⁰²

³⁰¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*. Quoted in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelly*, London, Frederick Warne and Company, (n.d.), p. 55.

³⁰² Paul Verlaine, 'Mon Rêve familial' *Poèmes saturniens (Melancholia)*. Quoted in Thérèse Burollet et al., *Le Symbolisme dans les Collections du Petit Palais. Musée du Petit Palais*, Paris, 21 October 1988-19 February 1989, p. 116.

The image of the veiled feminine occurs frequently during the nineteenth century, for example, in the novellas of the German Romantic author Novalis and especially his *The Pupil of Saïs* and *Heinrich of Ofterdinge*. During the Symbolist period, the theme is clearly articulated in Khnopff's work which reflect similar themes of the mysterious veiled woman, for example *The Veil* (c. 1890) [Fig. 32], *Tête d'une femme* (1898), *Un Voile bleu* (c. 1909) [Fig. 33] and *Un Rideau bleu* (1909) [Fig. 34]. Of the works cited here, *The Veil* is distinct from the others in so far as it depicts the profile of a woman from the head to below the waist; the other works focus exclusively on the face. The figure in this work is dressed in a black mourning dress with a long black veil behind which the figure seems to hold her hands over her mouth. The image of the black veil also occurs in the final chapter of Lorraine's *Monsieur de Phocas*:

Un voile de gaze noire, une vapeur de crêpe qui dérobait le sexe et s'enroulait aux hanches pour se nouer comme un lien autour des deux chevilles, aggravant le mystère de la pâle apparition.³⁰³

The two most striking works are *Un Rideau bleu* and *Un Voile bleu*³⁰⁴. The two works are compositionally similar. The face of the figure is close to the picture plane; the format cuts the top of the face just above the eyes. In both, the face is partly concealed and partly visible; half exposed, and half hidden by vertical drapes of material that seem rather like curtains in front of the figure's face than something which she is wearing.

³⁰³ Jean Lorraine *Monsieur de Phocas*. (n. p.). Cited in Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, *op. cit.*, note 101, p. 426. Interestingly, Praz makes an association between this passage and the description of Isis in Apuleius' *Metamorphosis* (XI. 3) quoted in the following: 'Palla splendens atro nitore, quae circumcirca remeans... ad ultimas orans nodulis fimbriarum decoriter confluctuabat'. Cited in Praz, *ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Cf. George Sand, *Lélia*, 1^{ère} partie, XVIII, Paris, Garnier, 1960, pp. 54-55, 'N'avez-vous jamais pleuré d'amour, demande-t-elle, pour ces blanches étoiles qui sèment les voiles bleus de la nuit'. Cited in Juden, *op. cit.* p. 425.

The expression on the face of each is tranquil and without emotion and the lack of narrative reference suggests that these would serve as images of contemplation and reflection. It may be worth noting that the grainy texture of the parts of the face which are visible suggests the effect of their being seen through a frosted pane or a veil itself. The outlines are blurred and there is no distinct line between one plane and another. This technique has been noted in Mellery's works discussed above and is also seen in Khnopff's *The Silver Tiara* (c. 1900) [Delevoy, 1979:185]. This effect removes the subject of the image from natural or physical reality and enhances the feeling that it is an image from a different order, of the dream and fantasy.

Howe notes that the veil is a well-known attribute of the secret officiants of the Greek mysteries.³⁰⁵ In the context of the occult tradition, the veil suggests the figure of Isis whose veil conceals the mysteries of esoteric wisdom and initiation, 'the thick veil which conceals the invisible wonders from the eyes of men'.³⁰⁶ An inscription on the Temple to Isis at Saïs, the temple of initiation into the mysteries of Isis, reads: 'I am that which was, is or will be and no mortal yet has raised my veil'.³⁰⁷ To remove the veil is symbolic of the attainment of

³⁰⁵ Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

³⁰⁶ Schuré, *op. cit.*, p. 246. It is worth mentioning that Helen Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical movement during the latter part of the nineteenth century which was dedicated to spreading the teachings of Eastern occultism, titled one of her major works on the subject: *Isis Unveiled: A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Theology*.

³⁰⁷ Quoted in Bettina L. Knapp, 'Gerard de Nerval's *Isis* and the Cult of the Madonna', *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, volume III, numbers 1 and 2, Fall - Winter 1974-1975, p. 65. A hymn addressed to Isis-Net expresses this idea of the Veil Of Nature which hides the mystery of truth from human eyes:

Hail, mother great, not hath been uncovered thy birth!
 Hail goddess great, within the underworld which is doubly
 hidden thou unknown one!
 Hail thou divine one great, not hath been unloosed!

spiritual enlightenment, or initiation. The image of Isis is a central symbol in mythology and esoteric thought representing the principle of the 'Eternal Feminine'. In other words, she personifies the principle of the positive or Ideal feminine. Isis commands the cycles of birth and death in her role as goddess of nature, not only the cycles of physical birth and death but the symbolic birth and death experienced in the ancient rites of initiation. The analogy between death and the awakening to occult knowledge, signified through 'lifting the veil', is clearly suggested in de Nerval's incantation to Isis:

O nature! ô mère éternelle! était-ce là vraiment le sort réservé au dernier de tes fils célestes? Les mortels en sont-ils venus à repousser toute espérance et tout prestige, et, levant ton voile sacré, déesse de Saïs! le plus hardi de tes adeptes s'est-il donc trouvé face à face avec l'image de la Mort? ³⁰⁸

Moreover, she is the ruler of the interior realm of transformation; she is the feminine 'alpha' and 'omega'. Apuleius, writing in the second century A.D. records the words of the goddess Isis addressed to him during his initiation:

I am she that is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the initial progeny of worlds, chief of the powers divine, queen of all that are in hell, the principle of them that dwell in heaven, manifested alone and under one form of all the gods and goddesses. At my will, the planets of the sky, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the lamentable silences of hell are disposed; my name, my divinity is adored throughout the world, in

O unloose thy garment [veil].

Hail [Hidden One], not is given by way of entrance to her...

E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, volume I, London, 1904, p. 459, cited in M Esther Harding, *Woman's Mysteries, Ancient and Modern*, Shambhala, Boston and Shaftesbury, 1990, p. 182.

³⁰⁸ Gérard de Nerval, *Isis*. In, *Nerval le rêve et la vie*, Hachette, Paris, 1955, p. 166.

divers manners, in variable customs, and by many names.³⁰⁹

The significance of the image of Isis, as the embodiment of the power of the positive feminine, would have been familiar to the Symbolists from various obvious sources. Gerard de Nerval, the Romantic author, devoted a work to the theme of Isis in which he describes the temple of Isis and the liturgy of the ceremonies devoted to the worship of the Goddess. In addition, de Nerval discusses the analogies between the cult of the Virgin and the cult of Isis - the celestial Mother who bears the child of redemption and rebirth.³¹⁰ De Nerval's work was a typical expression of the Isis 'cult' which prevailed in European literature during the early part of the nineteenth century, and especially in France where the figure of Isis became the personification of the Ideal, or 'eternal' feminine. The works of Saint-Chéron, Ronchaud, and Jules Lefèvre explored the same theme during this period. Juden has noted the importance of the theme of Isis during the nineteenth century and its connection to the neo-Platonic notions of love and beauty: 'Isis cristallise l'inspiration de la poésie, et l'aspiration vers *l'impossible et l'Idéal*... En Isis aux mille noms s'unissent, en effet, les élans, espoires, enthousiasmes des années 1830, les cultes de l'amour, de l'idéal et du beau'.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, translated by W. Adlington, Book XL, cited in Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Penguin, London, 1964, p. 43.

³¹⁰ Vide, Gérard de Nerval, *Isis, Nerval le Rêve et la vie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-170. Vide also Knapp, *op. cit.*

³¹¹ Juden, *op. cit.*, p. 434-435. Vide *ibid.*, pp. 428-435, for a summary discussion of the importance of the figure of Isis during the early part of the nineteenth century in the context of the aesthetic of the ideal feminine and the Platonic impulse in the aesthetics of that period.

Direct exposure to the cult of Isis and its significance in the context of the aesthetics of the Ideal feminine would more than likely have been derived from Schuré's *The Great Initiates*. Schuré explains that Isis has three different meanings:

Literally she personifies Woman, and from this the universal feminine gender. Comparatively, she personifies the fullness of terrestrial nature, with all its reproductive powers. In the superlative, she symbolises celestial and invisible nature, itself the element of souls and spirits, spiritual light, intelligible in itself, which initiation alone confers.³¹²

Elaine Showalter has discussed the occurrence of the theme of the 'veiled woman' in her work on sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century. She demonstrates that the image of the veil had many nuances and meanings for *fin-de-siècle* artists. On the one hand the veiled woman was associated with the mysteries of the Orient. She writes:

Indeed, the Oriental woman behind the veil of purdah stood as a figure of sexual secrecy and inaccessibility for Victorian men in the 1880's and 1890's, much as the nun, another veiled woman, had done for Gothic novelists in the 1780's and 1790's.³¹³

Moreover, the veil was associated with femininity in so far as veiling was associated with female sexuality and the veil of the hymen: 'The veil thus represented feminine chastity and modesty; in rituals of the nunnery, marriage and mourning, it concealed sexuality'.³¹⁴

³¹² Schuré, *op. cit.*, p. 191-192. during the period the Hegelian inspired novelist, Villier's de l'Isle-Adam created a novel entitled *Isis*.

³¹³ Elaine Showalter, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.* A theme which relates to the motif of the veil is the Bride. The feminine as Bride, is conventionally the embodiment of innocence and purity. The theme of innocence and purity form the basis for a great many Symbolist images (von Stuck's *Innocence*, Jan Preisler's *Puberty*, Khnopff's *Melisande*, Thorn Prikker's *The Bride* etc.) The image of the bride can also be interpreted in terms of the notion of the Shekinah found in the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah. The Shekinah is here

v) *The Feminine as Mother Goddess: The Origins of Life*

An important theme related to the occult tradition of Isis is that of the feminine as Mother Goddess or Idol, in her incarnation as the supreme feminine principle. The theme is suggested in Khnopff's *The Idol* [Fig. 42] which represents the many breasted Diana of Ephesus as well as in Giovanni Segantini's *The Angel of Life* (1894) [Fig. 43] and Previatti's *Maternity* [Fig. 44].

Segantini's painting *The Angel of Life* is a startling image of a woman with a child on her lap seated on the branch of a tree high above a landscape with a large lake seen in the distance. The image of a woman with a child in her arms in Segantini's work is ubiquitous in the tradition of the Mother Goddess or Madonna. The image of the Virgin Mary holding the child-god in her arms is familiar to Christian iconography. A parallel exists in the iconography of the goddess Isis who is often depicted with the child-god Horus in her arms, conceived 'miraculously' subsequent to the dismemberment of Osiris.³¹⁵ The theme is common in traditions in which the worship of the Madonna as principle of life prevails - where the miracle of birth is seen

seen as the feminine counterpart to God and manifests itself in a positive and negative aspect. One of the symbols of the Shekinah is the Bride. Vide, Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, translated by Ralph Manheim, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1965, pp. 104-108, 138-142. Jan Toorop's *The Three Brides*, painted after he met Péladan, whose occult aesthetic was informed by Kabbalist philosophy, could suggest a reading of the image as an expression of the Shekinah.

³¹⁵ Gérard de Nerval discusses at length the many similarities between the cult of Isis and the Virgin Mary, vide Knapp, *op. cit.*, p. 66 et seq. see figure 31 in Harding, *op. cit.* for a depiction of Isis holding the infant Horus.

to be analogous to the fecundity of nature and the processes of spiritual transformation.

Moreover, the association between the Mother-goddess, the bearer of all life, and the tree, as in Segantini's work, has many resonances in mythology. Erich Neumann has noted, 'In the symbolic equation of a Feminine that nourishes, generates, and transforms, tree, *djed* pillar, tree of heaven, and cosmic tree belong together'.³¹⁶ Neumann has noted, further, the significance of this association:

The Great Earth Mother who brings forth all life from herself is eminently the mother of all vegetation. The fertility rituals and myths of the whole world are based upon this archetypal context. The centre of this vegetative symbolism is the tree. As fruit-bearing tree of life it is female: it bears, transforms, nourishes; its leaves, branches, twigs are 'contained' in it and dependant on it. The protective character is evident in the treetop that shelters nests and birds. But in addition, the tree trunk is a container, 'in' which dwells the spirit, as the soul dwells in the body. The female nature of the tree is demonstrated in the fact that treetops and trunk can give birth, as in the case of Adonis and many others.³¹⁷

The association between the fecundity of the mythic feminine and the tree seen in Segantini's work, is further suggested in Previati's *Maternity*. The shrouded female forms seated beneath

³¹⁶ Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: an Analysis of the Archetype*, translated from the German by Ralph Mannheim, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963, p. 243. (Hereafter *The Great Mother*).

³¹⁷ Erich Neumann *The Great Mother* *ibid.*, pp. 48-49. The association between the Mother Goddess and the tree is found in Egyptian mythology. Neumann notes:

The goddess as the tree that confers nourishment on souls, as the sycamore or date palm, is one of the central figures of Egyptian art. But the motherhood of the tree consists not only in nourishing; it also comprises generation, and the tree goddess gives birth to the sun.

Neumann, *ibid.*, p. 241. A relief on a ring found in the tomb of Pylos shows the Minoan mother goddess seated on a bough of a tree. Illustrated in Joseph Campbell *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Penguin Books, London, 1964, p. 51.

the tree are articulated in a twilight landscape bathed in an atmosphere of mystery and suggestion. Moreover, the manner in which the work is articulated in a silent intangible dream-like atmosphere enhances the ritualised and iconic nature of its theme.

Another work which is associated with the theme of the feminine as Mother Goddess is Fernand Khnopff's *L'Idole*. The focus of the work is the image of the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus. In front of her hang two ornate metal lamps. At the base of the statue a nude female figure is drawn in very light tones with head twisted to the left. In contrast to the well articulated features of the statue, the features of the female figure below are barely distinguishable. The composition is framed in a tondo. The fecundity of the feminine and the quality of 'life-giver' and 'nurturer', in other words of 'mother', seem to be emphatically suggested by the image of the statue of the Diana of Ephesus with its accent on the breasts.

The breast is the ultimate zone of nourishment and therefore serves as an important symbol of the life giving and creative powers of the Ideal feminine. Moreover, it can be regarded as a sacred vessel of transformation in which the 'feminine mystery' of the miraculous transformation of blood into milk takes place.³¹⁸ The multiplication of the breast seems to suggest a celebration of this quality of the feminine. Neumann has observed that the, 'archetypal experience of the Feminine as all-nourishing is evident in the multiplication of the breast motif'.³¹⁹ The many-breasted Diana of Ephesus is a personification of the 'maternal-principle' of the feminine and

³¹⁸ Cf. Neumann, *The Great Mother, op. cit.*, p. 123.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

related to the theme of the great goddess already encountered in the motif of the tree, now encountered as the 'Great Many Breasted Mother'.³²⁰ These observations may suggest aspects of the numinosity of the image as a symbolic vehicle in Khnopff's painting.

A key element of this work is its compositional format. The tondo is a compositional device often used by Khnopff and appears in other works, for example, *Etude pour Des Caresses* and *Le reflet Bleu, Des Bruns et une Fleur Bleu* (1905) [Fig. 46], *Le Pommeau Bleu*, (1912) and *Le Secret* (1902). The tondo is related to the motif of the circle which is another significant element in Khnopff's work. The circle motif occurs in for example, the mirror in *Mon Coeur Fleur d'Autrefois* (1891), and *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1891); the shield in *La Défiance* (1897); the sphere in the central panel of *l'Isolement* and the transparent round glass in *Près de la Mer* (1890).

The circle is one of the primary symbols in the occult and hermetic tradition, with which Khnopff was well familiar. Most importantly, the circle signifies the idea of wholeness and self-contained original unity.³²¹ In this sense this motif is related to the image of the androgyne which, as will be discussed in the following chapter, was a central symbol during the *fin-de-siècle* of the synthesis of duality and the reconciliation of opposites.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³²¹ Neumann has observed that:

Circle, sphere, and round are all aspects of the Self-contained, which is without beginning and end; in its preworldly perfection it is prior to any process, eternal, for in its roundness there is no before and no after, no time; and there is no above and no below, no space.

Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*. Translated from the German by R. F. C. Hull, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964, p. 8. (Hereafter, *Origins*).

The circle is, moreover, related to the mandala, the circular hermetic image of meditation and contemplation.³²²

The circle is also related to the feminine in so far as it signifies the uroboric state of original wholeness experienced in the womb. It signifies the original state of wholeness and self-sufficiency before birth and differentiation.³²³

As 'round' the uroboric condition suggests the vessel or container which itself can be reduced to the womb: 'The uroboros appears as the round 'container', i.e. the maternal womb, but also as the union of masculine and feminine opposites, the world parents joined in perpetual cohabitation'.³²⁴

In Khnopff's image, the depiction of the Diana of Ephesus in the tondo format is suggestive in view of the traditional associations between the circle motif and the matrix of the maternal discussed above and its associations with the state of original unity and wholeness in the Platonic and Neoplatonic

³²² Delevoy has observed that this was one of the important functions associated with the circle in Khnopff's work:

Khnopff utilise d'abord le cercle comme instrument de contemplation: lorsqu'il se tient au milieu du rond magique tracé à même le sol de son atelier, l'inspiration vient l'illuminer. Avant tout le cercle est donc pour Khnopff le *mandala*... au centre duquel il se situe pour rêver, depuis lequel il se projette et dans lequel il se répercute.

Robert Delevoy, *et al. Fernand Khnopff*, La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1979, p. 108.

³²³ The uroboros is the primordial image of this condition of unity and wholeness. As Neumann has noted:

...the uroboros, the circular snake biting its own tail, is the symbol of the... state of beginning, of the original situation... As symbol of the origin and the opposites contained in it, the uroboros is the 'Great Round', in which positive and negative, male and female... are intermingled.

Neumann, *The Great Mother*, *ibid.*, p. 18.

³²⁴ Neumann, *Origins*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

tradition. Khnopff's work can be read as a celebration of this primordial character of the feminine as 'mother': firstly in terms of the experience of original unity in the uroboric round of the maternal womb and secondly in terms of the dual significance of the feminine as 'bearer of life'; with regard to this 'round' womb motif - as site of transformation, of blood into foetus, and vessel of fecundity and 'nurturer'; with regard to the motif of the breast - as site of transformation, of blood into milk, and vessel of nourishment. Moreover, as 'mandala', the work can be interpreted as a significant image for the contemplation of the mysteries of the maternal aspect of the mythic feminine.

THE MYTHIC FEMININE AS ANDROGYNE
IN SYMBOLIST ART

I

The Androgyne in Late Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature

The present chapter will focus on the subject of the androgyne in Symbolist art. The subject of the androgyne is one of the most interesting aesthetic symbols in the art and literature of the non-Realist period. The present discussion will emphasise that the androgyne is a complex symbol which represents the synthesis of contraries and denotes the principle of unity and oneness. Further, it will be indicated that it suggests a sexual, social, political and spiritual utopia of original wholeness and the union of opposites.³²⁵ In other words, it represents an ideal condition which is absent from the ordinary world. The principle of original unity associated with the concept of the androgyne is one of the essential notions in the esoteric and hermetic traditions and has a long history in Western occult and mystical writings, from Plato to Péladan. It is largely from this tradition that artists of the period derived their understanding of the notion of unity and its expression through various symbols especially that of the androgyne.

The figure of the androgyne is a hybrid, commonly constructed as a being half male, half female. Moreover, as will be discussed in this chapter, the androgynous figure is epicene and in its

³²⁵ Vide A. J. L. Busst, 'The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century', in Ian Fletcher (ed.) *Romantic Agonies*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, pp. 1-95.

blend of masculine and feminine, was seen, during the late-nineteenth century, to constitute the supreme synthesis of opposites - personified by the sexes.³²⁶ The androgyne was also seen to personify the Ideal and the original state of being. In its synthesis of opposites - of masculine and feminine, of spirit and matter - it was seen to partake of both orders of reality and therefore mediates between the two. Many of the images of the androgyne during the *fin-de-siècle* partake of these qualities. However, various distinct variations should be noted such as the masculinised female and the feminised male which are relative to the pure blend of the sexes, although, conceptually equivalent.

Many of the attributes of the androgyne indicated above are similar to those of the Ideal feminine discussed in the previous chapter. It was suggested that the spiritual nature of the Ideal feminine was a function of it being a personification of the Ideal and served as a symbol of Ideal love and beauty.

³²⁶ This paper draws no distinction between the terms 'androgyne' and 'hermaphrodite'. In much of the literature from the Symbolist period, the terms are, for the most part, used interchangeably and are conceptually identical. With regard to this issue, Busst has noted:

The distinction established from time to time between the terms 'androgyne' and 'hermaphrodite' have always been purely arbitrary and consequently contradictory. Hirshfeld, for example, uses hermaphroditism to designate *hermaphroditismus genitalis* and androgyny for *hermaphroditismus somaticus*; while according to Franz van Baader the hermaphrodite is bisexual and the androgyne asexual. Rather than add to the already excessively long list of extremely doubtful distinctions, it is preferable to consider the two terms exactly synonymous by accepting their broadest possible meaning: a person who unites certain of the essential characteristics of both sexes and who, consequently, may be considered as both a man and a woman or as neither a man nor a woman, as bisexual or asexual.

Busst, *ibid.*, p. 1. References to Hirshfeld and Baader are respectively: F. Giese, *Der romantische Character. Erste Band: Die Entwicklung des Androgynproblems in der Frühromantik*, Langensalza, 1919, p. 406. E. Susini, *Franz von Baader et le romantisme mystique* t. 3, Paris, 1942, p. 547.

Furthermore, it was seen that the figure of the Ideal feminine served as mediator between the material and the spiritual orders of reality. Although partaking of these qualities, the symbol of the androgyne is more complex in that it is also an expression of the problem of the synthesis of opposites and original unity. It is therefore a more complete expression of the spiritual problem which pervaded Symbolist culture regarding the relationship between the material and the Ideal as well as the pervasive issue of duality and synthesis discussed in the Introduction.

Various other themes and motifs, such as the theme of incest and the motifs of the mirror and the 'Blue flower' as well as the circle, are part of the principle of androgyny in so far as they represent the desire for, or principle of, original wholeness. A discussion of these will be included in this chapter.

Although the image of the androgyne occurs in the art and literature of the Symbolist period generally, this chapter will focus attention on the writings of Joseph Péladan and the paintings of Fernand Khnopff. Khnopff was closely associated with Péladan and the image of the androgyne features prominently in the work of both. Khnopff provided numerous illustrations for Péladan's novels. In 1885 Khnopff exhibited a group of drawings intended for Péladan's *Le Vice Suprême*. In 1888 he collaborated with Péladan and provided frontispieces for *Femmes Honnêtes* and later for *Le Victoire du Mari* and *Le Panthée*. Khnopff also participated in Péladan's Salons, taking part in four out of six exhibitions in the years 1892-97. Péladan would at one time celebrate Khnopff's art as the paragon of his own aesthetic

programme; Péladan celebrated Khnopff's work in the preface to the catalogue of the second Salon de la Rose+Croix:

Vous avez été parmi plusieurs admirables le grand argument de ma thèse en ce plaidoyer pour l'idéal qui s'appelle déjà le Premier Salon de la Rose-Croix. Je vous tiens pour l'égal de Gustave Moreau, de Burne-Jones, de Chavannes et de Rops, je vous tiens pour un admirable maître... Je prie les Anges amis de mon beau dessein que vous soyez fidèle à l'Ordre de la Rose-Croix qui vous proclame par ma voix maître admirable et immortel.³²⁷

During the *fin-de-siècle*, the androgyne was constructed as either feminised male or masculinised female, which were on the whole conceptually analogous. However, the masculinised female as androgyne, which occurs most frequently in works by Péladan and Khnopff, is an important variant on the theme of the representation of the mythic feminine during the Symbolist epoch and will therefore be the specific focus of this chapter.

However, it may be instructive, first of all, to look briefly at some of the representations of the androgyne, and figures of ambivalent gender, which occurred in the art and literature during the nineteenth century.

One of the earlier novels during the nineteenth century in which the subject appears is Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835-36), which was to have a significant influence on later Symbolist thinking.³²⁸ Gautier's work deals with a figure that

³²⁷ Quoted in Delevoy, et al., *Fernand Khnopff*, La Bibliothèque des Arts, Lausanne, Paris, 1979 p. 77. Moreover, a critic referred to Khnopff as, 'the ablest and most far-seeing of Péladan's Belgian disciples'. (W. Shaw-Sparrow, 'English art and M. Fernand Khnopff'. *The Studio*, II, 1894, p. 205. Quoted in Olander, *ibid.*) Vide also Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 20 for further discussion on the relationship between Khnopff and Péladan.

³²⁸ According to Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

appears sometimes male, sometimes female and is, furthermore, loved by both man and woman. Gautier's androgyne believes itself to belong to a third sex:

En vérité, ni l'un, ni l'autre de ces deux sexes n'est le mien; je n'ai ni la soumission imbécile, ni la timidité, ni les petitesesses de la femme, je n'ai pas les vices des hommes, leur dégoûtante crapule et leur penchants bruteaux... je suis d'un troisième sexe à part qui n'a pas encore de nom: au-dessus ou au-dessous, plus defetueux ou supérieur: j'ai le corps et l'âme d'une femme, l'esprit et la force d'une homme, et j'ai trop ou pas assez de l'un et de l'autre pour me pouvoir accoupler avec l'un deux.³²⁹

The subject of androgyny would also occur in the works of Swinburne, notably, *Lesbia Brandon*, (1864) and Balzac, especially, *La Fille aux yeux d'Or*, as well as his *Séraphita-Séraphitus*. The last named would have some influence during the late nineteenth century, especially in the works of Péladan.³³⁰ During the Symbolist period, the theme of the androgyne was explored in, for instance, Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*. However, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is in the works of Péladan that the issue of the androgyne is most comprehensively explored. Péladan's conception of the androgyne appears in most of the twenty-one novels which constitute the *Décadence Latine: Éthopée*. A detailed discussion of Péladan's work will take place below.

With regard to the occurrence of the subject of androgyny in the visual arts generally, it is in the work of Gustave Moreau that

³²⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, Éditions Garnier Frères, 1955, p. 352. Quoted in Richard Charles Flint, *Fin de Siècle: The Concept of Decadence in French and English Art during the Late Nineteenth Century*. Ph.D. Indiana University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University Microfilms International, 1979, p. 44.

³³⁰ *Vide Praz, op. cit.*, p. 226. It may be worth noting, in passing, that Latouche's *Fragoletta* (1829) was probably the earliest work during the nineteenth century to explore the theme of the androgyne.

the representation of the theme is overt, especially the androgynous male. As already suggested, the importance of Moreau's paintings for many Symbolist artists and writers cannot be overstated. His representation of the feminine has already been indicated to have had a significant impact on the artists of the *fin-de-siècle*. During the period, Huysmans drew attention to the androgynous figure in Moreau's *The Apparition*:

Her [Salome's] eyes fixed in the concentrated gaze of a sleepwalker, she neither sees the Tetrarch, who sits on there quivering, nor her mother, the ferocious Herodias, who watches every movement, nor the hermaphrodite or eunuch who stands in hand at the foot of the throne, a terrifying creature, veiled as far as the eyes and with its sexless dugs hanging like gourds under its orange striped tunic.³³¹

It is, moreover, Moreau's conception of the male figure, especially during his later years, invariably as androgynous young men or adolescents of a particular formal type, with long fair hair, delicate facial features and slender limbs and body, that made his work especially attractive to the artists of the Symbolist epoch.³³² It is a striking characteristic of Moreau's subjects that it is the figure of the poet - the artist - which is constructed in the form of the feminised male, the androgyne. The Symbolist notion that the artist is able to convey knowledge of the Ideal and mediates between the material and Ideal worlds, already discussed in the Introduction, is suggested in Moreau's work. Here the poet, or artist, is constructed as androgyne - itself the symbol of the Ideal world.

³³¹ J.-K. Huysmans *Against Nature*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

³³² *Vide* Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau, with a catalogue of finished paintings, watercolours and drawings*, translated from the French by James Emmons, New York Graphics Society, Boston Massachusetts, 1976, p. 165.

In his private notes to the painting of the Spartan poet *Tyrtaeus*, Moreau stresses that the poet must be represented as 'young, feminine only in his facial features and of an antique beauty'.³³³ In the same picture, the lyre-bearer is conceived in similar terms, 'This figure must be completely draped and very feminine. It is almost a woman, who alone amidst this eager host can understand the self-sacrifice and suffering of the poet'.³³⁴ Similar figures are encountered in works such as *The Persian Poet*, (1886) [Fig. 50] and especially, *The Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur* (c. 1890) [Fig. 49]. The latter is a cogent expression of the form of the androgynous male which would become popular in England and France during the end of nineteenth century; of pale skin, soft curvaceous, feminine body and limbs as well as the sensitive facial features. Other significant examples of Moreau's work in this regard include, *Apollo and the Satyrs* (c. 1885), *Apollo Victorious over the Serpent Python* (c. 1885) and *The Inspiration* (c. 1893).

Further prominent examples on the theme occur in, for example, the art of the English school. Simeon Solomon's *Dawn* (1871) [Fig. 51] and *Night and Sleep* typify the artist's conception of the androgynous male. The figures in these works bear the characteristic sexual ambivalence peculiar to the theme of androgyny. Solomon's figure in *Dawn* bears a striking resemblance to the 'androgynous' *ignudi* of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. In this regard, they perhaps reflect the taste for figures of ambivalent gender in Renaissance art, particularly by Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, which was current during the *fin-de-siècle*. Moreover, the late Pre-Raphaelite paintings by

³³³ Moreau, from notebook in the archives of the Musée Gustave Moreau, p. 27. Quoted in Mattieu, *ibid*.

³³⁴ Moreau, from notebook in archives of Musée Gustave Moreau, p. 30. Quoted in Mattieu, *ibid*.

Edward Burne-Jones, for example, *Love Leading the Pilgrim* (1896-97), display a similar tendency towards the depiction of figures which are epicene and sexually liminal.

One of the most pronounced examples from the Continent is the painting by the Belgian Symbolist artist Jean Delville, titled *The School of Plato*. Delville depicts the figure of Plato seated on a bench in an Idyllic landscape in the pose derivative of medieval and Renaissance depictions of Christ of the Apocalypse. Surrounding the classical philosopher are twelve figures in various poses; seated, standing or lying. These figures are startling depictions of the androgynous male. Each figure is a study in sexual ambivalence, with soft, lithe bodies, long hair and gentle facial features. The figure on the left of Plato even has little breasts as if to emphasise its liminal sexuality. The obvious reference to Christ teaching the twelve disciples in this work is conspicuous and would conform to the esoteric reading of Christianity current during the period and especially in works such as Edouard Schuré's *The Great Initiates* which outlines the parallels in the teachings of, amongst others, Plato and Christ. Delville was, moreover, deeply influenced by Péladan, whose ideas on androgyny, inspired by Plato (especially the *Symposium*), had a major influence on many artists during the *fin-de-siècle*. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

Of the artists of the Symbolist period, it is probably Fernand Khnopff whose paintings and drawings best express the masculinised female form of the androgyne. Khnopff's representation of the androgynous type is perhaps best illustrated by the figures represented in works such as *Du Silence* (1890) [Fig. 9] and *Une Ville Morte* (1889) [Fig. 8] as well as the figure in the middle panel of the triptych titled *L'Isolement* (1890-92) [Fig. 13] and the standing figure in the

work *Un Ange* (1889) [Fig. 3]. Typically, Khnopff's androgynous masculinised female is recognisable by the representation of a 'boyish' female figure usually with short-cropped hair and pronounced jawline and clothed in garments that conceal obvious gender traits. These features are evident in the figure in *Du Silence*, for example, dressed in a loose hanging chemise-like garment which conceals any definition of breasts and body contour thus effectively disguising any overt gender traits. The enigmatic quality of the work is not only emphasised through the pose of the figure and the title, but also through the placing of the figure in an undefined setting, a device, already discussed in Chapter I, emphasising the conceptual quality of the image. In *Une Ville Morte*, the strong masculine features in the face of the figure and tightly pleated hair result in a striking rendering of an androgynous female figure. The figure in the centre panel of *l'Isolement* is similarly constructed in the syntax of gender ambivalence noted in the above two works.

The chaste quality of Khnopff's androgynous females, which will be seen to be an essential component of the theme in his work, is thrown in relief when contrasted with his construction of the female type as seducer and *femme fatale* as well as his figures of erotic desire. The figure in *Who Shall Deliver Me* (1891) [Fig. 5] is a stark rendering of a phantom-like female figure. The strong bone structure, especially in the jaw-line and red hair are familiar features of Khnopff's rendering of the feminine. Yet, it is the rendering of the eyes as pale, even colourless, that imparts an eerie quality to the face and to the figure generally. The pale quality in the eyes seems to be peculiar to Khnopff's renderings of the negative and sensual feminine (although there are important exceptions). The same features are present in, for example, *The Blood of the Medusa* [Fig. 52] with its overt, almost illustrative approach to the theme of the

destructive female. The figure in the pastel *Près de la Mer* (1890) [Fig. 48] displays almost identical features to those described above. The same strong jaw and red hair relate it to the models in many of the other depictions of the feminine in Khnopff's oeuvre. Moreover, it has the same blond, colourless eyes as those seen in other works on the theme of the negative feminine. The general sense of this work is implicitly sensual which is expressed directly through the depiction of the long, red hair which the figure gently caresses. The motif of long, untied hair can be read as an emblem of eroticism and sensuality. This is more explicitly rendered in Khnopff's *Tête de Femme* (1899) [Fig. 53] where the blond-eyed figure of a woman is couched in an abundant head of loose flowing hair. The sensual eroticism of these figures with their long, voluptuous hair is directly contrasted with the chastity of the androgynous figures of the feminine in Khnopff's work with their short cropped, or tightly pleated hair and prominent masculine bone structure especially in the jaw and chin.

Khnopff's androgynous types can best be understood in terms of the contemporary intellectual ethos in which the theme of the androgyne was propagated, specifically the writings of Joseph Péladan. In the discussion that follows concerning Péladan's conception of the androgyne, it will be clear that the symbol is essentially polyvalent and acquires a range of meanings, albeit within a defined philosophical context. On the whole, however, Péladan's conception of the androgyne partakes of the traditional associations indicated above but he developed these in the context of the revival of mythology, Idealist philosophy and the hermetic tradition that took place during the late nineteenth century.

That the androgyne appeared as a central motif in Péladan's writings had already been noted by a contemporary, Anatole France, who observed:

Monsieur Joséphin Péladan est plus dangereux encore pour ceux qu'il défend. Peut-être blasphème-t-il moins que le vieux docteur des *Diaboliques*, car le blasphème était pour celui-là l'acte de foi par excellence. Mais il est encore plus sensuel et plus orgueilleux. Il a plus encore le goût du péché. Ajoutez à cela qu'il est platonicien et mage, qu'il mêle constamment le grimoire à l'Évangélie, qu'il est hanté par l'idée de l'hermaphrodite qui inspire tous ses livres: et qu'il croit sincèrement mériter le chapeau de cardinal!³³⁵

The androgyne became the central symbol of Péladan's conception of the new art and of the Ideal. Péladan's aesthetic theories, from which his conception of the androgyne is constructed, are firmly rooted in late nineteenth-century Idealism. He favoured the notion that art is an expression of the Ideal and that it carries a redemptive function.³³⁶ Of the Ideal, Péladan stated that, 'the Ideal is not any idea; the Ideal is all idea made sublime, carried to the furthestmost point of harmony, of intensity; of subtlety'.³³⁷ In an early article Péladan addressed the artist and proclaimed, 'Love art, love the ideal, love the beautiful and keep marching. You are on God's path and moving towards Him'.³³⁸

Furthermore, according to Péladan, the artist has a special commitment to the Ideal world and the Ideas therein:

³³⁵ Anatole France, *La Vie Littéraire*, volume iii, pp. 237-238, n.d. Quoted in Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

³³⁶ Vide Pincus-Witten, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³³⁷ Péladan, *La Décadence Esthétique*: volume I, 'L'Art Ochloratique, Salons de 1882 et 1883', Dalou, Paris, 1888, pp. 156-157. Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *ibid.*, p. 41.

³³⁸ Joséphin Péladan, 'Le Chemin de Damas', Part I, in *Le Foyer*, September 18, 1881, p. 270. Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Sois fidèle à l'idéal, ô poète! N'aime que les idées... tu es plus qu'un homme, tes amours ne doivent pas être de terre comme les nôtres. Va, sois bon et chaste, chante et marche.³³⁹

Péladan sought to reform art and denounced realist trends inspired by materialism. He developed these ideas in the context of his esoteric forum for the exhibition of art, the *Salon de la Rose+Croix*. According to Péladan, the Salons would support the renovation of mystical Idealism through art:

Or, l'Art seul peut agir sur le collectif animique, à défaut de mysticité... Insuffler dans l'art contemporain et surtout dans la culture esthétique, l'essence théocratique, voilà notre voie nouvelle... Ruiner la notion qui s'attache à la bonne exécution, éteindre le dilettantisme du procédé, subordonner les art à l'art, c'est-à-dire rentrer dans la tradition qui est de considérer l'idéal comme le but unique de l'effort architectonique ou pictural ou plastique.³⁴⁰

With regard to the new aesthetic ideals propagated by Péladan, Pincus-Witten has noted that:

Péladan announced a crusade for a new art. With extravagant literary conceit rapid and inspired, with a kind of divine authority, Péladan denounced the servile neo-classicism promoted by the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts and the official Salons as well as the materialism of the realist trends... The new ideal of which Péladan became the loquacious herald, was to be achieved not so much through a radical change of content... [rather]... Péladan proposed an art suffused with meaning, with idea.³⁴¹

In Péladan's aesthetic, it is the image of the androgyne, in its synthesis of idea and form, that personifies the new aesthetic ideal. Péladan stated:

Statuary... has but one theme, the human body, under its double form of masculine and feminine. All

³³⁹ Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême*, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

³⁴⁰ Péladan, *Instauration de La Rose-Croix Esthétique, Parole Du Sar de la Rose-Croix à ses pairs*. Quoted in *La Décadence Latine Éthopée X, Le Panthée*, Paris, Dentu, 1892, p. 317. Reprinted, Editions Slatkine, Geneva, 1979.

³⁴¹ Pincus-Witten, op. cit., p. 40.

synthesis is a ternary. I propose this aesthetic theory: *the androgyne is the plastic ideal.*³⁴²

Moreover, he continued, 'Outside the androgyne, this synthesis of form, there are no immortal statues... Outside of Dogma, this synthesis of mystery, there is for art no salvation'.³⁴³ Besides the art of ancient Greece, which Péladan celebrated for its exoneration of the androgynous ideal, he was frequently to celebrate da Vinci's *Giaconda* and *St. John the Baptist* as plastic expressions of androgynous perfection and saw in da Vinci's creations the realisation of the androgyne as the ideal symbol of art and the perfect union of contraries personified by the sexes. These are, moreover, central characteristics of the symbol of the androgyne in Péladan's own works. Péladan observed:

Léonardo a trouvé le canon de Polyclète, qui s'appelle l'androgyne... l'androgyne est le sexe artististique par excellence, il confond les deux principes, le féminin et le masculin, et les equilibre l'un par l'autre. Tout figure exclusivement masculine manque de grâce, toute autre exclusivement féminin, manque le force... Dans la *Jaconde*, l'autorité cérébrale de l'homme de génie se confond avec la volupté de la gentile femme, c'est de l'androgynisme moral... Dans le *Saint-Jean*, la mixture des formes est telle, que le sexe devient une énigme... Le realisateur de l'éphèbe, de l'adolescent a trouvé le claire-obscur... Le *Saint-Jean* du Louvre manifeste ce procédé dans sa plénitude: mais au lieu d'un clair-obscur physique, extérieur, d'un jeu de lumière et d'ombre, Léonardo découvrit le clair-obscur animique.³⁴⁴

Further, this passage is informative of, amongst other things, the fascination with the general ambivalence of the androgynous

³⁴² Péladan, 'Ésthetique à l'exposition nationale des Beaux-Arts', *L'Artiste*, December 1883, p. 435. Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *op. cit.*, p. 44. Similarly, he stated elsewhere that, 'The androgyne, that is the youth equally distant from both male and female is the plastic ideal'. in *L'Art Idéaliste et Metaphysique*, Paris, 1894, p. 44. Quoted in Olander, 'Fernand Khnopff's Art or the Caresses', *Arts Magazine*, volume 51, 1977, pp. 118.

³⁴³ Péladan, 'L'Esthétique à la Exposition Nationale des Beaux-Arts'. Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁴⁴ Péladan, 'Epilogue', in *Leonardo da Vinci, conferenza fiorentine*, Treves, Milan, 1910, p. 308. Quoted in Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

figure - moral, aesthetic and sexual - which formed part of the attraction of the androgynous motif during the late nineteenth century. This fascination is similarly expressed in Huysmans' *À Rebours*, in the passage describing the protagonist's seduction of Miss Urania, the woman acrobat with the athletic body:

Little by little, as he watched her, curious fantasies took shape in his mind. The more he admired her suppleness and strength, the more he thought he saw an artificial change of sex operating in her; her mincing movements and feminine affectations became even less obtrusive, and in her place there developed the agile, vigorous charms of a male. In short, after being a woman to begin with, then hesitating in a condition verging on the androgynous, she seemed to have made up her mind and became an integral, unmistakeable man.³⁴⁵

Péladan's intellectual sources for his conception of the androgyne were largely derived from the neo-platonic tradition as well as the writings of Plato, especially the *Symposium*. Pincus-Witten notes that Péladan quoted Aristophanes' speech from the *Symposium* on the androgyne in an article published in 1883 titled, 'L'Esthétique à l'exposition nationale des Beaux-Arts'.³⁴⁶ Furthermore, the September issue of *La Revue Indépendante* of 1891 carried an article praising highly the development of Platonic theories, especially those found in the *Symposium*, in Péladan's writings.³⁴⁷

Plato's myth of the androgyne, related in the *Symposium*, introduces the basic three-fold scheme characteristic of all subsequent philosophical systems in which the androgyne appears. This constitutes a condition of original unity and wholeness at

³⁴⁵ J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁴⁶ Printed in *L'Artiste*, December 1883, pp. 433-75. Pincus-Witten, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁴⁷ Vide J. Aymé, 'Tribune Libre, M. Joséphin Péladan, L'Amour platonicien en 1891', *La Revue Indépendante*, XXI, September 1891, pp. 311-44. Quoted in Pincus-Witten, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

first, followed by an event that results in a separation of opposites and an ensuing state of duality and, finally, a phase in which an attempt is made to achieve a state of original unity again through the reconciliation of polarities, usually represented symbolically through the reconciliation of sexual opposites. Thus, according to Plato, 'the Hermaphrodite was a distinct sex in form as well as in name, with characteristics of both male and female'.³⁴⁸ Plato describes these original beings as spherical in shape, 'the human being was a rounded whole, with double back and flanks forming a complete circle'.³⁴⁹ Although logically inconsistent, according to Plato the hermaphrodite constituted a third sex, apart from the male and the female and is seen by him to be a synthesis of the two sexes: originally, according to Plato, the male sprang from the sun and the female from the earth. The hermaphrodite, on the other hand, came from the moon, 'which partakes of the nature of both sun and earth'.³⁵⁰ This clearly suggests that the androgyne is a synthesis of opposites. Plato's myth describes the state of duality which resulted from the splitting of the original beings into two, referring to the splitting of the state of original unity into duality. The desire for these separated beings to return to their original state of wholeness is vividly described:

Man's body, having been thus cut in two, each half yearned for the half which they had been severed. When they met they threw their arms around one another and embraced in their longing to grow together again.³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

³⁴⁹ Plato, *ibid.*, p. 60. As indicated in the chapter on the Ideal Feminine, the circle is a traditional form for the expression of a condition of original wholeness and unity and is traditionally associated with the theme of the androgyne.

³⁵⁰ Plato, *ibid.*

³⁵¹ Plato, *ibid.*, p. 61.

The theme of love as the medium through which this return to original unity is achieved is stressed in Plato's account of the androgyne as it is in all subsequent thinking on the subject.

Péladan's esoteric interpretation of the subject of the androgyne is set forth in two volumes of the *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes: Comment on devait fée. Erotique* (1893) and *La Science de l'amour* (1911) where he closely follows the three-fold schema described above superimposed on the myth of Creation in the book of *Genesis*.³⁵² Moreover, in Péladan's novel *Curieuse*, the second in the *Décadence Latine Éthopée*, the artist-mage character, Nebo, paraphrases the myth of the androgyne from Plato's *Symposium*:

Au commencement, il y avait trois genres: le masculin issu du soleil, le féminin de la terre, et l'androgyne de la lune qui participe des deux. Ces androgynes étant des êtres complets, devinrent redoutables aux dieux, car fermés à l'amour qui occupait la vie des deux premiers genres, ils tentèrent, pour s'occuper, d'escalader les cieux et d'y supplanter les immortals.³⁵³

Péladan would also refer to the works of some of the nineteenth-century authors in which the subject of the androgyne occurs, for example, Balzac's *Séraphîta-Séraphîtus* and Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*,³⁵⁴ which would suggest a familiarity with these sources as well.

In Péladan's novels, the character of the androgyne is either the adolescent ephebe such as Samas in *L'Androgyne* (1891, volume VIII of the *Éthopée*) or feminine such as the princess Paule Riazan who figures in *Curieuse* (1885, volume II), *L'Initiation Sentimentale*

³⁵² Vide Busst, *op. cit.*, p. 67-69 for a discussion of Péladan's ideas in this regard.

³⁵³ Péladan, *La Décadence Latine Éthopée II, Curieuse*, Librairie de la Presse, Paris, 1886 edition, p. 14. Reprinted in Editions Slatkine, Geneva, 1979. Vide Plato, *The Symposium, op. cit.*, pp. 59-61.

³⁵⁴ Vide *Curieuse, ibid.*, pp. 14, 24 and 57.

(1886, volume III) and *A Coeur Perdu* (1887, volume IV). In *Curieuse*, Nebo is instantly attracted to the androgynous beauty of the princess Riazan:

La beauté de la princesse étant mi-partie d'un jeune homme et d'une jeune fille, elle doit avoir dans l'âme la même dualité; j'ai salué en elle, l'être complet, possédant le double charme féminin et virile, et exprimé ainsi combien puérile tout cour, l'androgyné se suffisant à lui-même et n'aimant pas.³⁵⁵

The self-sufficiency of the androgyne referred to here is an important characteristic of the symbol. This is also expressed at times in terms of its virginity. In *L'Androgyne*, Péladan states, 'l'androgyné n'existe qu'à l'état vierge: à la première affirmation du sexe, il se résout au mâle ou au féminin'.³⁵⁶ Both these qualities refer to the idea of the original unviolated state of wholeness peculiar to the notion of androgyny as the personification of unity and oneness. This is also expressed in, for example, Plato's story of the Original Beings related in the *Symposium* and in Plotinus' discourses on the original metaphysical condition termed the All-One in the *Enneads*. These will be discussed further in the sections below.

Further, Nebo salutes the princess as the consort of the Ideal through whom the Absolute can be attained:

j'ai rencontré l'âme qui m'attendait... elle est à moi comme Ève fut au serpent; mais séduire divin... Alors ce tendre coeur n'aura plus que mon coeur, cette pensée désorbitée ne pourra pas sortir de l'orbe de la mienne; et la Béatrice, la dame des néo-platoniciens, soeur par l'effacement du sexe, homme par le développement de la conception, femme par la tendresse, existera pour la première fois!... De la créature qui nous cache l'Absolu, je fais un miroir qui me le réverbère.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Péladan, *Curieuse*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁵⁶ Péladan, *L'Androgyne*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³⁵⁷ Péladan, *Curieuse*, *op. cit.* pp. 34-35.

The notion that the androgyne is the mediator between the real and Ideal worlds, suggested here, is another significant characteristic of the symbol. As indicated, this is also an attribute of the Ideal feminine. Péladan's conception of the androgyne is in part related to that of the Ideal feminine, as already indicated in Chapter III, but it takes on a wider philosophical significance in its associations with the concepts of oneness and original unity.

A further aspect of the androgyne, which is suggested in the above extract, is that it is an object of 'desire', not of a physical, but rather of a spiritual nature. In the *Vice Suprême*, Péladan describes the passionate desire of the Princess d'Este, for the androgynous ideal:

Oh! Etre deux! deux coeur et le même battement, deux esprits et la même pensée, deux corps et le même frisson... Ces deux coeurs fondus en une adoration, ces deux esprits unis en une admiration, ces deux corps enlacés en une delectation... Deux! la voix et l'écho. Deux! l'existence double! un être ajouté à son être; en soi deux, à côté du désir la satisfaction: le rêve de l'androgyne réalisé selon le lois, la création initiale retrouvé.³⁵⁸

The notion of desire in Symbolist art has already been referred to in the preceding chapters. The desire for the androgyne can similarly be understood to be not of a physical or sexual nature, but as the metaphoric expression of a metaphysical desire; for the Ideal and for transcendence from the material order of reality, of eroticism and the instincts - against which the ideal of the androgyne stands.³⁵⁹ Many of these observations regarding

³⁵⁸ Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

³⁵⁹ Busst's analysis of the androgyne during the late nineteenth century, and including some of Péladan's writings on the subject, emphasises the erotic aspect attached to the image of the androgyne. Busst situates the desirability for the androgyne in the context of the spirit of Decadence during the fin-de-siècle which was characterised by a disillusionment with the world and practical life and an ensuing withdrawal into an inner world of

the conception of the androgyne in Péladan's writings will be useful for a broader understanding of the image in the work of Khnopff.

II

The Ideal and the Material: The Androgyne and the Sphinx in the Work of Khnopff.

Many of Khnopff's depictions of the androgyne, already discussed, can be read in the light of the above discussion. One of the more important images by Khnopff, though, which seems to personify the ideal of the androgyne and which will be specifically focused on here is *Un Ange*. This work can be understood better in the light of the discussion above on the meaning of the image of the androgyne. *Un Ange* depicts a standing figure clad in medieval armour with its hand gently clutching the hair of a tiger-sphinx woman. The composition suggests a relation between opposites which is especially evident in the overt contrast between the taut verticality of the Angel and the more languid and supple horizontality of the sphinx. This relation between opposites is further suggested in the meaning associated with each figure. The

the mind and the imagination:

the desire for those disillusioned with exterior reality can be contented only by the mind, and consequently the fact that the hermaphrodite does not truly exist in reality otherwise than as a creation of the mind, of pure art, accounts not only for its beauty, but also for its voluptuousness (*op. cit.*, p. 42).

Busst's argues that practice of 'cerebral lechery' which characterises many characters in Decadent literature, for example, the archetypal *femme fatale* in Péladan's *Le Vice Suprême*, Léonora d'Este, who seek erotic satisfaction in the mind and the imagination rather than in reality, find their ideal love object in the androgyne. Busst's interpretation of the androgyne in terms of sexuality and eroticism highlights some of the peculiarities of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and compliments the Idealist connotations associated with the symbol in *fin-de-siècle* Symbolism which is the specific focus of the present paper.

significance of the image of the angel has already been discussed in the preceding chapter as a personification of the Ideal feminine or, more significantly, as a symbol for the Ideal itself. This would suggest an interpretation of the significance of the image of the angel. Yet, in Khnopff's image, the standing knight-angel is constructed in the syntax of the androgyne and is commonly regarded as androgynous by critics of the image.³⁶⁰ The facial features of this standing figure closely resemble those of many of the androgynous females in other works by Khnopff which have already been referred to. This androgyneity of the standing figure would suggest a richer range of meanings if situated in the context of the theme of the androgyne in the art of the *fin-de-siècle* as personification of wholeness and of the Ideal. With regard to the sphinx, the equation between woman and animal and nature (instincts and sexuality) and ultimately materialism discussed in the chapter on the *femme fatale*, which is associated with the image of the sphinx, would pertain particularly to Khnopff's supine tiger-sphinx hybrid. The assertion that the image has to do with the relation between opposites is thus further reinforced through an understanding of the respective iconographies of each figure in this work. In other words, it suggests some relation between the Ideal and the Material.

Pierrot has indicated that the opposition between the sphinx and the angel was exploited *ad nauseam* as an expression of polarity during the *fin-de-siècle*.³⁶¹ In Edouard Schuré's *L'Ange et la Sphinge* (1897), for example, the polarity between the sphinx and

³⁶⁰ Vide Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 42 *et seq.*, and Olander, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

³⁶¹ Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900*, translated by Derek Coltman, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1981, p. 128.

the angel, as images of danger and benevolence respectively, is clearly expressed:

A pale beam of light from on high will follow you...
 May you never lose it! Try to grasp it, and when the
 angel wearing a betrothal crown appears to you...
 drink in that light! If you glimpse that angel, the
 voice of silence will speak to you; and if it speaks,
 you will hear the trumpets bray for war... But beware
 of the sphinx, who has a woman's face and breasts but
 a tiger's claw.³⁶²

Khnopff's painting would seem to belong to this tradition of imagery. However, this paper would argue that Khnopff's painting goes beyond the exploration of a popular contemporary genre, but can be understood to represent a very specific understanding of the relationship between Idealism (the androgynous Angel) and Materialism (the feminine sphinx-animal) current during the Symbolist period. The understanding of this relationship maintains, in effect, that the Ideal and the Material are not irreconcilable opposites, but correlatives and essentially one and the same thing considered from two opposite points of view. The clue to this interpretation in the image lies in the specific relationship between the two figures. The Angel and the Sphinx are clearly linked compositionally through the grasp of the hand of the standing knight. There is no conflict between the two which appear, on the contrary, to be in a state of harmonious co-existence. As Howe has observed, 'this is not a struggle: they are frozen in a timeless embrace. In fact what is symbolised here is not the expulsion of sensual passion, but the redirecting and sublimation of these energies'.³⁶³ On this point, the work can be contrasted with other images from the Symbolist period which deal with the relationship between opposites such as, for

³⁶² Edouard Schuré, *L'Ange et la Sphinge*, Paris, Perrin, 1897, p. 99. Quoted in Pierrot, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

³⁶³ Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

example, Jean Delville's *Symbolisation de la chair et de l'esprit* (1892) [Delevoy, 1979:92] and Carlos Schwabe's *Spleen and Ideal* (1896). Both these works depict overt conflict and resistance between the respective figures which represent polarities and the principle of opposites.

The particular relationship between Idealism and Materialism indicated above is clearly articulated in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. In the following, it will be argued that Khnopff's image is predicated on a Schopenhauerian conception of the special relationship between the Ideal and the Material and is, moreover, a visual exposition of the relationship between these two contrary constructs.³⁶⁴

Schopenhauer's Idealist philosophy, which has already been referred to in the chapter on the Ideal feminine, is essentially expressed in his phrase 'the world is my representation'. Schopenhauer coined the phrase as a concise expression of his view on the essential distinction between the real and the ideal

³⁶⁴ Khnopff's affiliation to the philosophical and aesthetic ideals of Schopenhauer's thought is well known. Howe has regarded Schopenhauer's work as the foundation of Khnopff's aesthetic. *Vide Howe, op. cit.*, p. 12. Moreover, Khnopff's biographer, Louis Dumont-Wilden, emphasised the relationship between Khnopff's art and Schopenhauer's philosophy in maintaining that Khnopff:

is perhaps the only one of his contemporaries whose work corresponds exactly with the pessimist aesthetic as it was formulated by Schopenhauer. Art, disinterested contemplation, art which frees one from desire and consequently from regrets, is certainly for him the remedy, the supreme consolation for the *Mal d'Etre*.

Quoted in Howe, *ibid.*

According to Feinberg, Khnopff was to be exposed to Schopenhauer's ideas through talks by George Rodenbach which Rodenbach delivered in Belgium on his return from France where he in turn attended lectures by Ernst Caro on Schopenhauer at the Collège de France in 1897. *Vide Feinberg, 'Symbolism and the Romantic Tradition'. Bulletin Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin Ohio, 43, Summer 1988, p. 9.*

nature of reality. In this regard, Schopenhauer's position holds that:

The world, which alone is immediately given to us, is only ideal, in other words, one that consists of mere representation in our head; whereas over and above this, we understand to judge a real world, in other words, one that exists independently of our representations.³⁶⁵

Schopenhauer maintains, as already discussed, that the existence of the world is dependant on the consciousness on which it exists. Therefore, he maintains, knowledge of the material world - that which is extended in space - 'exists' as such simply in our 'representation, and, therefore, is real only to the extent that it is represented in the subjective consciousness. He states that, 'It is false and indeed absurd to attribute to it, as such, an existence outside all representations and independent of the knowing subject'.³⁶⁶ Therefore, we can only be sure of the knowledge of something as it exists in our consciousness. Hence what we know, is limited to what is known to our own consciousness. In a summary of his position, he states that:

There can never be an existence that is objective absolutely and in itself: such an existence, indeed is positively inconceivable. For the object, as such, always and essentially has its existence in the consciousness of a subject; it is therefore the representation of the subject, and consequently is conditioned by the subject, and moreover by the subject's forms of representations, which belong to the subject and not to the object.³⁶⁷

The implication of this position is that we can never know the world *directly*, but only as it is mediated by our own consciousness - which itself can only 'know' of that world

³⁶⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Sketch of the History of the Ideal and the Real', *Parerga and Paralipomena*, translated from the German by E. F. J. Payne in two volumes, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974, volume I, p. 9.

³⁶⁶ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, *op. cit.*, volume II, p. 4.

³⁶⁷ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, *ibid.*

through the perceptions mediated through the senses. In effect, this position holds that we are trapped in our own organism and can never know anything 'in-itself' beyond its boundaries, or more particularly, the skin and the nerve endings beneath the skin.

Naturally, the question arises then as to what the 'material' world is really if it can never be known directly but only indirectly as the representation of our own consciousness. In other words does matter have an 'objective' substantiality and exist independently of our representations of the world of extension of which it is a part, or does it only exist in our representation of it? If it does exist as in the former case, then it must be regarded as the 'thing-in-itself', in other words, as the essence of reality and should therefore be taken as the basis for any epistemology - which is, in fact, the exact position of the Realists and materialists. On the other hand, if the material order of reality exists merely as our representation, then the Idealist position would obtain and would therefore provide the basis for a theory of knowledge.

Schopenhauer indicates that the monistic position of the realist or materialist is insufficient in so far as it sees nature or matter as the only world order, on which we are dependant, in so far as it eliminates the reality of the subjective consciousness.³⁵⁸ Idealism, on the other hand, according to Schopenhauer, frees us from the state wherein we are merely functions of the material world. He states:

By making the objective world dependant on us, idealism gives the necessary counterpoise to the dependence on the objective world in which we are placed by the course of nature. The world from which I part at death, is, on the other hand, only my

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

representation. The centre of gravity of existence falls back on the *subject*. What is proved then is not... the knower's independence of matter, but the dependence of all matter on the knower.³⁶⁹

The limitations of the materialist position, according to the Idealist, lies in the fact that matter, taken as the essence of reality can be the starting point of an epistemology only if all the properties of matter were correctly, completely and exhaustively known - which is not possible. However, Schopenhauer indicates further that the Idealist position, defined by the axiom, 'the world is my representation', is actually also insufficient for being biased in favour of the *subject*. In other words, what is known of the subject is, paradoxically, very much a function of that which exists in the world of extension, without which there would be no contents of consciousness, in other words, no representation. Furthermore, since consciousness is dependent on its representations, without the latter, there would be no consciousness. In other words, as Schopenhauer maintains, the 'subject as such, is also conditioned by the object'.³⁷⁰ Hence, he maintains:

For the proposition that 'the subject would nevertheless be a knowing being, even if it had no object, in other words, no representation at all' is just as false as is the proposition of the crude understanding to the effect that 'the world, the object, would still exist, even if there were no subject' *A consciousness without object is no consciousness at all...* if we deprive the *subject* of all the particular determinations and forms of its knowing, all the properties of the *object* also disappear, and nothing but *matter without form and quality* is left.³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ Schopenhauer, *ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁷⁰ Schopenhauer, *ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷¹ Schopenhauer, *ibid.* Emphasis in original and added.

The consequence of this original idealist position is that neither the consciousness of the knowing subject, i.e. the realm of the Ideal, nor matter as such, i.e. the realm of the Material can be considered as sufficient in themselves for an understanding of reality, or the thing-in-itself. Rather, each should be regarded as two poles of the world of representation. In other words, Schopenhauer indicates:

Both belong to the phenomenon not to the thing in itself; but they are the framework of the phenomenon. Both are discovered through abstraction, they are not given immediately, pure and by themselves.³⁷²

Thus, according to Schopenhauer, the positions of Idealism and Materialism are, at base, really only *relative* to one another and are, in reality, *not in absolute opposition*. Rather, both these constructs are two aspects of the same (greater) metaphysical reality denoted by the concept of the 'will'. Schopenhauer articulates this view as follows:

The fundamental mistake of all systems is the failure to recognise this truth, namely, that *the intellect and matter are correlatives*, in other words, the one exists only for the other; both stand and fall together; the one is only the other's reflex. *They are in fact really one and the same thing, considered from two opposite points of view; and this one thing... is the phenomenon of the will or the thing-in-itself.* Consequently both are secondary and therefore the origin of the world is not to be looked for in either of them.³⁷³

It is here argued that Schopenhauer's particular resolution of the opposition between the Ideal and the Material, as outlined in the above quotation, is exactly the position expressed in Khnopff's *Un Ange*. This is strongly suggested in the iconography of the two figures and their relationship to each other. A polarity is expressed between Idealism, personified, as already discussed, by the androgynous knight-angel on the one hand, and

³⁷² Schopenhauer, *ibid*.

³⁷³ Schopenhauer, *ibid*. Emphasis added.

Materialism, personified by the sensual female sphinx on the other. The key feature of the image that relates it directly to Schopenhauer's view on the correlative relationship between these two polarities, would seem to be the mutual, even harmonious, co-existence of the two figures which suggests that this image expresses more than a simple study of polarities as such. Despite being opposed to each other - in terms of both their iconography and compositional relationship - the two figures are nonetheless intimately related without being in conflict. In other words, the image represents a union of opposites and a true *complexio oppositorum*. This notion of the harmonious co-existence of opposites, of the Ideal and the Material, is also expressed in the following passage by Rémy de Gourmont which suggests, at least, an awareness of the issue during the period:

Tout objet a deux aspects: l'aspect matériel et l'aspect idéal.. Il y a donc bien authentiquement deux mondes: l'un phénoménal, frappant l'âme par les sens et s'y introduisant en notations directs, l'autre intuitif, produit de l'âme, et empruntant pour se traduire les formes du premier... il s'ensuit que le réalisme et l'idéalisme sont deux tournures de l'esprit, deux manières d'envisager la vie...³⁷⁴

Another significant work by Khnopff which includes the image of the androgyne is *Art or the Caresses* (1896) [Fig. 12]. This painting is probably one of the most allusive and enigmatic works produced during the Symbolist period. *The Caresses* shares many visual and compositional parallels with *Un Ange* and hence one would expect an analogous iconographic programme in this work. The standing figure carrying a staff is an intriguing study of the figure of the androgyne. The naked torso is that of a young male, yet the facial features are distinctly those which appear in Khnopff's works representing the feminine - distinguished by

³⁷⁴ 'Aurier et l'évolution idéaliste', *Mecure de France*, volume iii, 1893, p. 239. Quoted in Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 44-45.

particular traits notably a broad jaw, heavy chin and straight nose. This is more clearly noticeable in an undated work which depicts a close up of the two heads framed in a tondo format. The face of this androgyne is pressed against the head of a crouching leopard-sphinx with closed eyes. It is curious that the physiognomy of this creature is also reminiscent of Khnopff's feminine type. The composition of the work echoes that of *Un Ange* and is based on a strong vertical and horizontal component. However, the narrow, horizontal format of this work is in sharp contrast to the vertical format of *Un Ange* which results in an emphasis on the sphinx rather than on the androgyne, as in the latter work. The long narrow format used in this work appears frequently in Khnopff's work, notably in *Près de la Mer* and *I Lock my Door Upon Myself*, and emphasises the symbolic nature of the painting. The unusual format emphasises that the image is not a picture-window view onto the real world but, rather a view onto an entirely different order of reality, of the idea and the imagination.

The two figures in this work are similarly in a state of harmonious co-existence as the Angel and the sphinx in *Un Ange*. As Olander expresses this startling psychological situation:

Instead of [a] battle, there is the amorous exchange between the two mythical types. Instead of a crisis, there is the very absence of one. Rather than violence, there is an atmosphere of intense inner vibration in which movement and noise are deliberately avoided in favour of a timeless vigil occurring as if in a vacuum.³⁷⁵

The relationship between the two figures, and their respective iconographies, strongly suggests the relationship between the Ideal and the Material, the spiritual and the sensual, discussed with regard to *Un Ange*. In this work, this identity or kinship

³⁷⁵ William R. Olander, 'Fernand Khnopff's "Art or the Caresses"', *Art Magazine*, volume 51, January - June 1977, p. 118.

is further emphasised in that the two figures have the same facial traits. This is one of the interesting features of the work since it suggests a familial kinship between the androgyne and the sphinx. The two figures are opposite to each other but form a pair suggesting what could be viewed as a brother-sister relationship. The similarities in the features are, in other words, a visual statement that the one partakes of the nature of the other. Olander interprets this image as an idealised representation of the relationship between the artist Khnopff, as artist-androgyne, and his sister Marguerite:

The two commingle; androgyne and sphinx, brother and sister, transferring energy from one to another. The androgyne of the painting, therefore, can be analogously identified as Khnopff himself, and the graceful youth assumes the symbolic identity of the artist. The androgyne-artist, symbol-creator of the ideal becomes the beloved of the sphinx-sister, the mystery of life, and both aspects of the artist's Narcissism - self and sister - are expressed.³⁷⁶

Olander alludes to an issue, which is frequently raised with regard to Khnopff, concerning the theme of incest and the image of the mirror. This will be dealt with in the following sections, although the interpretation of these motifs will be different from Olander's. It will be suggested that these motifs are intrinsic to the subject of androgyny as expressions of the desire for the synthesis of opposites (the integration of the inner 'other') and of wholeness.

However, this kinship between the two figures which, as already indicated, refers to the harmonious co-existence of opposites and the notion of union in duality, can be understood to refer to an aspect of the image of the sphinx which is peculiar to the esoteric tradition. This view holds that the sphinx was considered an early evolutionary form of man and that the union

³⁷⁶ Olander *op. cit.*, p. 120.

of opposites revealed in the body of the sphinx, between animal and human, prefigured the final union of opposites which man shall achieve as androgyne. Péladan articulates this view in the following:

Esotériquement il représente l'état initiale de l'homme qui est identique à son état final. Il lui enseigne le principe d'évolution et le secret de bonheur... et ce secret se déchiffre aisément par le mot amour qui consiste héraldiquement dans le rapprochement de la barbe et des seins, dans l'androgynisation passionnelle. Le Sphinx incarne le théologie complète avec la solution des origines et des finalités... Le Sphinx sourit à son devenir illimité, il a reconstitué son unité sexuelle, étant homme et femme, il sait qu'il reconstituera un jour son unité originelle, car il est homme et dieux, dans la mesure même de l'involution à l'évolution.³⁷⁷

In view of this, the relationship between the androgyne and the sphinx expresses a relationship between past and future. The notion of unity in duality suggested in the above is further reflected in Khnopff's *The Caresses* in the two columns on the right. The significant feature of these columns is that they are united by a golden chain - echoing the union between the androgyne and the sphinx in the foreground through the caressing paw of the latter. The image of the double column is fairly ubiquitous in the esoteric tradition as the primal symbol of duality and usually refers directly to the dual pillars at the entrance of the Temple of Solomon namely, Jachin and Boaz.³⁷⁸ That the two columns are joined by a chain, would suggest that they represent the union of opposites and a union in duality. Moreover, the orb with two wings mounted at the end of the androgyne's staff would seem to suggest the same. The sphere suggests the notion of original wholeness - a concept commonly associated with that form in the hermetic tradition - and the two

³⁷⁷ Péladan, *De l'Androgyne*, Paris 1910, pp. 16-17. Quoted in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

³⁷⁸ Vide J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Translated by Jack Sage, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962, p. 24.

wings suggest the notion of duality. That the wings are attached to the orb suggests the idea of unity in duality once again. The staff seems to be related to the *caduceus*, a traditional symbol of the union of opposites, which was the staff of the god Hermes who mediated between the gods and mortals, i.e. between heaven and earth. The choice of this emblem is significant in the context of Khnopff's work in so far as the androgyne, as already discussed, is seen as a mediator between the two realms of the earthly-material and heavenly-ideal.

It may be instructive to conclude this section by focusing attention on the figure of the androgyne in *Art or the Caresses*, which suggests further characteristics of the image common to the writings of Péladan. One of the more allusive qualities of the androgyne is evident in the physical relationship between the two figures in this image.

Compositionally, the emphasis is on the horizontal posture of the sphinx's powerful body. Her paw gently touches, or perhaps caresses, the naked torso of the androgyne and her face, with eyes closed, is expressive of self-satisfaction. The amorous advances of the sphinx are, however, sharply contrasted by the indifference of the androgyne who stands stoically with eyes open engaging the space of the viewer. The firm stance of the androgyne and the lack of reciprocal action with regard to the erotic advances of the sphinx suggests an erotic detachment on the part of this figure. This aspect of the content of the work can be directly contrasted with Franz von Stuck's *The Kiss of the Sphinx*, which is similar in content to Khnopff's work but depicts a passionate, almost violent, embrace between a sphinx and a male figure who is completely overwhelmed by the aggressive seduction by the sphinx.

This aloofness of the androgyne is a clue to an understanding of the figure in an idealist context. Some of these qualities of *Art or the Caresses* can be understood better in relation to Péladan's notions of art, love, beauty and androgyny which have already been briefly discussed but which are worth exploring further. It has been noted that the androgyne, according to Péladan, personifies the original state of being, of the Ideal, and that this condition of original wholeness is expressed in terms of its self-sufficiency (virginity). Furthermore, one should consider that the androgyne is seen as the supreme object of *beauty*. According to Péladan, the beauty of the androgyne - the creation of art - eclipses natural beauty which is personified by the woman's body and is, in fact, more beautiful than Venus herself, 'L'art a crée un être surnatural, l'androgyne, auprès duquel Vénus disparaît'.³⁷⁹

Péladan's ideas can be related to those found in Plato's *Symposium* regarding ideal love and beauty which have already been discussed in the previous chapter. Plato's description of the ideal realm shares several characteristics with Péladan's ideal state, the androgyne, which itself personifies the ideal original condition. In Plato's doctrine, this realm of original wholeness and perfection is the realm of *Absolute Beauty*, which is in-itself, self-sufficient: 'This beauty is first of all eternal, it neither comes into being nor passes away... it [is] absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal'.³⁸⁰ This conception of the original state of being, as the personification of beauty and a condition of unviolated unity which is self-sufficient, is further expressed in the writings of Plotinus. Plotinus' notion

³⁷⁹ Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes, Comment on devient fée. Erotique*, Paris, 1893, p. 305. Quoted in Busst, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

³⁸⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

of The One, the original state of unity and wholeness, is similarly personified as the paragon of beauty.³⁸¹ Moreover, Plotinus asserts:

Think of The One as Mind or as God, you think too meanly; use all the resources of understanding to conceive this Unity and, again, it is more authentically one than God, even though you reach for God's unity beyond the unity most perfect you can conceive. For This [sic] is utterly a self-existent, with no concomitant whatsoever. This self-sufficing is the essence of its unity. Something there must be supremely adequate, autonomous, all-transcending, most utterly without need.³⁸²

This neoplatonic conception of the original state of wholeness as the paragon of beauty and within itself entirely self sufficient (virginal) is suggested in Péladan's invocation to the androgyne in his 'Hymne à l'Androgyne'. Péladan writes:

Sexe très pur et qui meurs aux caresses;
 Sexe très saint et seul au ciel monté;
 Sexe très beau et qui nies la parèdre;
 Sexe très noble et qui défies la chair;
 Sexe irréel que quelques-uns traversent comme
 autrefois Adamah en Eden...
 O sexe initial, sexe définitif, absolu de l'amour,
 absolu de la forme, sexe qui nies le sexe, sexe
 d'éternité! Los à toi, Androgyne.³⁸³

That the androgyne partakes of some of the metaphysical attributes related to the neoplatonic tradition is not to

³⁸¹ Vide Plotinus, *Enneads*, op. cit., *Ennead*, 1, vi, 9.

³⁸² Plotinus, *ibid.*, *Ennead*, VI, ix, 6.

³⁸³ Péladan, *L'Androgyne*, op. cit., p. 7 and 9. That the image of the androgyne is none the less articulated through material means and therefore still partakes of qualities of the material world, suggests a sensual component to the androgyne. This constitutes an essential paradox in the figure, which has already been encountered in other symbols of the non-realist period, in so far as it is the expression of an essentially transcendental construct through means particular to the natural order of reality. It will be remembered from the discussion in the Introduction, however, that it is through the sensual material element of the symbol that one is attracted to the transcendental, metaphysical principle inherent in that symbol. This constitutes a resolution, in Idealist thinking, between the material and the transcendental.

overlook the fact that the figure of the androgyne, as it is constructed in Symbolist art, still partakes of the physical, or natural world. The self-sufficiency of the androgyne would translate, in the language of the natural world, the realm of the senses, instincts and passions, as asexuality and virginity. This is clearly expressed in the above poem where the androgyne is celebrated for being detached from the world of the flesh, desire and sexual attachment. This is suggested in Khnopff's painting *Art or the Caresses*, where the androgynous figure shows no active response to the erotic advances of the sphinx but, rather, remains aloof and indifferent. Olander notes:

Thus, by denying sex, the androgyne... attains timelessness and immortality. To maintain this transcendent ideal state, he must continue to abstain from physical action and the conventions of contemporary life.³⁸⁴

Péladan's aesthetic effort is, on the whole, directed towards this end, i.e. of the anti-erotic - which is personified by the androgyne. This is better understood in terms of Péladan's esoteric ambitions which are directed towards the attainment of initiation and spiritual transformation. The fundamental premise of this discipline is the overcoming and control of the forces of nature - of the passions and the instincts. The artist Nebo, in *Curieuse*, explains the discipline required to the epicene Princess Riazan:

Deux morts ou mieux deux naissances nous séparent du bonheur: Il faut donc se préparer à la première en se détachant des instincts de façon à quitter le corps comme un vêtement lâche et détaché à l'avance; à la seconde en étouffant en nous les désordres du sentiment en les réduisant tous à la charité, afin que le péresprit ne nous navre pas en se déchirant. Donc le bonheur se produit en réduisant la vie végétative, en éteignant la vie passionnelle et en développant, de toutes nos forces, la vie intellectuelle, la seule éternelle!... et l'homme étant l'expansion de Dieu, l'expansion de l'homme sera de remonter à sa cause et

³⁸⁴ Olander, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

d'y chercher la conscience de son être par le désir toujours croissant de l'Infinité.³⁸⁵

As already indicated at the end of Chapter II, it is through the conquering of sexual temptation, personified by the allure of a beautiful woman, which leads to initiation and transcendence. It is for this reason that Péladan states, 'La femme... c'est la chair: et la chair, pour les races latines déjà éternuées et pour l'homme de pensée, c'est l'ennemi'.³⁸⁶ The orphic figure, the initiate Merodack, who frequently occurs in Péladan's novels, achieves this condition, which itself can be seen as a form of virginity or androgyny, through total abstinence:

il put déchirer le voile isiaque des vingt-deux arcanes de la Doctrine Absolue, dans leur triple rapport avec les trois mondes. La voie trouvée, le premier pas, c'était... la continence absolue.³⁸⁷

Thus abstinence is a condition of self-sufficiency and androgyny which characterises the individual that stands apart from the collective and who seeks differentiation through self-control and self-mastery. According to Péladan, 'l'androgyné; idéalement, c'est le puceau; pratiquement, c'est l'homme d'idée, d'art ou de sentiment... qui s'efforce vers l'auto-complémentarisme'.³⁸⁸

In Khnopff's work, the androgyné holds the staff of the magus, the initiate. Howe has indicated that the staff or sceptre is an emblem of spiritual and earthly power.³⁸⁹ This would suggest that the androgyné, in Khnopff's work, stands as a symbol of the

³⁸⁵ Péladan, *Curieuse*, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

³⁸⁶ Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême*, *op. cit.*, p. 208. *Vide supra* Chapter II, 'The Feminine as representation of the Animal, Nature and the Material'.

³⁸⁷ Péladan, *Le Vice Suprême*, *ibid.*, p. 160.

³⁸⁸ Péladan, *La Décadence Latine, Éthopée, IX La Gynandre*, Paris, Dentu, 1891, p. 254. Reprinted, Editions Slatkine, 1979.

³⁸⁹ Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

initiate and officiates over the inner mysteries in the same capacity as the orphic figures in Póladan's novels.

Read in the light of the above discussion, the figure of the androgyne, in Khnopff's painting, can be interpreted on many levels: as personification of the original state of wholeness and (sexual) unity; as personification of absolute beauty (the 'plastic ideal', i.e. the personification of art) and as initiate and magus who controls the forces of nature (physical and human). The detached indifference of the androgyne to the caresses of the sphinx is to some extent explicable in terms of the above discussion as is the somewhat enigmatic title of the work. The rhetorical opposition between 'art' or the 'caresses' is equivalent to the depicted relationship between the androgyne (Art-Ideal) and the sphinx (sensuality-Materialism). The resolution of this problem of opposites is the harmonious co-existence between them, in the sense discussed with the similar situation depicted in *Un Ange*.

A further point which should be discussed, which is traditionally associated with the androgyne, is the theme of love. The theory of Ideal love has already been discussed in Symbolist culture with regard to the subject of the Ideal feminine. It was indicated that Love is seen as the energy and the mechanism whereby one is drawn towards the Ideal through the recognition of the Idea hidden in forms. Traditionally, the theme of love is closely associated with that of the androgyne. Plato suggests that love is the *medium* through which the return to original wholeness is accomplished:

It is from this distant epoch, then, that we may date the innate love which human beings feel for one another, the love which restores us to our ancient

state by attempting to weld two beings into one and to heal the wounds which humanity suffered.³⁹⁰

It is through love that spiritual transformation is possible and through which this state of original wholeness and unity is achieved. In Péladan's view, love is seen as the force of the self that propels it towards unity and completion, Péladan states that love is 'l'effort du Moi pour se compléter et se confirmer'.³⁹¹ Moreover, Péladan celebrates the androgyne, in his 'Hymne à l'Androgyne as, 'absolu de l'amour'.³⁹² Thus, the sexual union symbolised by the androgyne is the basis for the synthesis of opposites resulting in the unitary and transcendent condition of original wholeness. Busst has noted:

love is the magical link which joins the self with the world; it is the reintegrating force which reduces spirit and matter, soul and nature, to unity. Love abolishes the distinction between spirit and matter in that, by magnifying the flesh, it spiritualises it, and at the same time tends to materialise the spirit by inclining it towards the body. Above all, love alone can give man that knowledge of nature which will restore his unity with nature...³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Plato, *Symposium*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

³⁹¹ Péladan, *Science de l'amour*, Paris, 1911, p. 35. Quoted in Busst, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³⁹² Péladan, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³⁹³ Busst, *op. cit.*, p. 62. Friedrichsmeyer has noted, in this regard, that love was similarly regarded among Romantic artists as the unifying force through which original unity, or androgyny, could be achieved:

Perhaps love often serves as the unifying archetype when an age has analyzed its need for wholeness; for the Romantics, heterosexual love often of the erotic variety, became the unitive symbol through which their philosophy could be realised... It is certain... that love for them accrued not merely practical but also metaphysical dimensions. As the meeting ground where the spiritual and the physical spheres could allegedly merge; it became their inspiration... Love was esteemed primarily because it was presumed to represent the merging of antipathies.

Sahra L. Friedrichsmeyer, *The Androgynous Ideal and its Resurgence in the Works of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel*, Ph.D., University of Cincinnati, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979, pp. 57 and 59.

The attainment of the transcendent condition of androgyny through love can be compared to the impulse towards transcendence

Khnopff's image could be understood better in the light of the above general discussion on the nature of the androgyne. Although *The Caresses* reflects many of the issues current during the *fin-de-siècle* with regard to the problem of duality and unity and the polarity of opposites as well as the issue of synthesis and wholeness, it cannot be reduced ultimately, it is felt, to a single categorical reading. The work is highly suggestive, which has already been emphasised as being an essential characteristic of Symbolist artistic practice generally. The various symbols used in this image and their relationship to each other could perhaps best be seen as operating in the form of a fugue, with one or several motifs woven together and operating on different levels of meaning, now appearing, now disappearing in a play of subtle references and allusions to conventional and private semantic and symbolic systems. It can therefore be seen as being symbolic, in the Symbolist sense discussed in the Introduction, in so far as it refers to something greater than the sum of its parts.

III

Androgyny and the Incest Motif:

Art or the Caresses

The theme of the integration of opposites and the return to original wholeness, integral to the subject of androgyny, finds its expression in various symbolic forms of which the theme of incest is a further significant example. The importance of this theme in the context of the symbol of the androgyne has frequently been acknowledged. Paglia has noted that incest is, 'one of the persistent situations in which the androgyne

discussed in this paper at the end of Chapter II.

manifests itself'.³⁹⁴ Busst has also indicated the widespread occurrence of the theme during the *fin-de-siècle*.³⁹⁵ The theme was ubiquitous in nineteenth-century art and literature generally and seemed even to spill over into reality as is attested to in the case of Byron's scandalous relationship with his half-sister Augusta.³⁹⁶ Moreover, the love between brother and sister was a favourite subject of the German *Sturm und Drang*³⁹⁷ as well as the work of Chateaubriand.³⁹⁸ The theme also occurs in Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*.³⁹⁹

An informative example of the Romantic form of the motif is Shelley's *Epipsychidion* in which the themes of incest and androgyny are prominent. Shelley's poem describes vividly the incestuous desire for the sister-muse in terms of an ecstatic marriage of opposites:

The fountains of our deepest life, shall be
 Confused in Passion's golden purity,
 As mountain springs under the morning sun
 We shall become the same, we shall be one
 Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?
 One passion in twin hearts, which grows and grew,
 Till like two meteors of expanding flame,
 Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
 Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still
 Burning, yet ever unconsumable.
 In one another's substance finding food,
 Like flames too pure and light unimbued.
 To nourish their bright lives with baser prey,
 Which point to heaven and cannot pass away:
 One hope with two wills, one will

³⁹⁴ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: The Androgyne in Literature and Art*, Ph.D. Yale University, 1974, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University Microfilms International, 1977, p. 301. Also *vide pp. 306 et seq.*

³⁹⁵ *Vide Busst, op. cit., p. 53 et seq.*

³⁹⁶ *Vide Praz, op. cit., pp. 71-73, and Paglia, op. cit., p. 301.*

³⁹⁷ *Praz, op. cit., p. 87, note no., 43.*

³⁹⁸ *Ibid., p. 109.*

³⁹⁹ *Ibid., p. 226.*

Two overshadowing minds...⁴⁰⁰

The theme was frequently to occur in the literature of the *fin-de-siècle*, as in for example, Catulle Mende's *Zo'har* (1886), Moréas' *La Faëenza* (1883) and Elémir Bourges' *Le Crépuscule des Dieux* (1884). Bourges' work deals with the theme of brother-sister incest and tells the story of a former singer La Belcredi, now official mistress to the duke Charles d'Este, and who is intent on acquiring undisputed sway over her lover's entire family. She makes it her business to inflame the incestuous passion she observes between the Duke's two children, Hans Ulrich and Christiane. She reads them John Ford's *Tis a Pity She's a Whore* in which the hero Giovanni indulges in a violent and physical relationship with his sister, Annabella; she has them sing the roles of Sigmund and Sieglinde in Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Finally having taken his sister sexually, Hans Ulrich kills himself, while Christiane ends her days in a Carmelite nunnery.⁴⁰¹

The incest motif also appears in Péladan's *Istar* (1888) where the forbidden desire for incest is commingled with an ostensible desire for the ideal:

nous qui semblons nous désirer, ma soeur, nous nous reconnaissons... Oui, vous êtes ma soeur, puisque vous récitiez tout bas l'hymne de l'irréel que chante à tue-tête. Oui, vous êtes ma soeur, car vous n'avez point exaucé les mortels balbutieurs d'amour et grossiers secoueurs de femmes... Oui vous êtes ma soeur, et le devoir ordonne qu'un moment je m'arrête en ma voie chimérique pour baiser votre coeur, et puis pour le fermer comme un saint tabernacle après la messe dites... Sororité, inceste, ou vertu ou péché, assumption ou bien chute, quel que soit le sort de notre amour naissant, qu'il se lève sur nous en aurore mystique... Si l'inceste venait un jour joindre nos

⁴⁰⁰ Shelley, *Epipsyichidion*, lines 570-585. Vide Paglia, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

⁴⁰¹ Resumé from Pierrot, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-138.

bouches, nous aurions du moins fait l'effort d'un grand devoir, et nous aurions lutté, avant la déchéance, contre la terre et sa force instinctive...⁴⁰²

In the visual arts of the *fin-de-siècle*, the theme can be identified in the lack of distinction between the features of figures in many of the paintings of the period. This frequent lack of variation makes it difficult to differentiate between individuals which suggests that a pair of lovers could be brother and sister or two brothers or two sisters.⁴⁰³ This is a particular feature of the work of Simeon Solomon, Burne-Jones, Moreau and Khnopff. Praz has noted this characteristic in the works of Moreau:

Moreau's figures are ambiguous: it is hardly possible to distinguish at first glance which of the two lovers is the man, which the woman, all his characters are linked by subtle bonds of relationship, as in Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*, lovers look as though they were related, brothers as though they were lovers, men have the faces of virgins, virgins the faces of youths, the symbols of Good and Evil are intertwined and equivocally confused. There is no contrast between different ages, sexes or types: the underlying meaning of this painting is incest, its most exalted figure the Androgyne.⁴⁰⁴

In Khnopff's *The Caresses*, the lack of distinction in the facial features of the androgyne and the sphinx and the suggested identity between them has already been indicated. This work in particular suggests strongly the type of incestuous liaison between figures characteristic of the period. However, in Khnopff's work, the theme of incest is more strongly suggested in so far as the actual features of many of Khnopff's representation of the feminine are similar, if not identical, to

⁴⁰² Péladan, *La Décadence Latine, Éthopée, V Istar*, Paris G. Édinger, 1888, pp. 160-161. Reprinted in Editions Slatkine, 1979.

⁴⁰³ Busst, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁴⁰⁴ Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

those of his sister Marguerite. Olander, and Howe following him, have argued that the features of Khnopff's sister, especially her prominent bone structure, which is apparent from photographs of her, as well as her red hair which she is reported to have had, are clearly represented in many of Khnopff's depictions of the feminine. Moreover, Khnopff based many of his compositions with female figures, or a female figure, on photographs he took of his sister. It is argued that Marguerite became the ideal model for the representation of women in his work.⁴⁰⁵ Prominent examples which portray the features of Khnopff's sister are *Mon coeur pleur d'autrefois* (1888-9) [Fig. 47], *Memories* (1889) [Fig. 54], *Une Ville Morte* (1889) [Fig. 8] *Du Silence* (1890), *The Caresses*, *The Secret Reflection* (1905) and *Des Yeux Bruns et une Fleur Bleue* (1905) [Fig. 46]. With regard to this character of Khnopff's paintings, Olander has suggested that, 'perhaps Marguerite was the object of a latent, if not overtly, incestuous desire on the part of her brother - conceptually perfect as a feminine ideal but realistically unattainable'.⁴⁰⁶ Following this viewpoint, Olander sees *The Caresses* as a representation of this relationship between Khnopff and his sister which is sublimated in the complex imagery of the androgyne and the sphinx where the sensual embrace between the two figures could indicate a real or repressed desire for an incestuous relationship in reality.⁴⁰⁷

Olander's argument is suggestive but the implicit evidence of the theme of incest in *The Caresses* is no basis for an argument for its presence in the relationship between Khnopff and his sister in reality. Moreover, any notion of an incestuous liaison between

⁴⁰⁵ Vide Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 42 et seq. and Olander, *op. cit.*, p. 116-118.

⁴⁰⁶ Olander, *ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴⁰⁷ Olander, *ibid.*, p. 120.

the artist and Marguerite, for which there is no evidence in reality, offers little to the understanding of the theme in a Symbolist context.⁴⁰⁸ Rather, an allegorical and symbolic approach to the theme, in the context of the spiritual tradition associated with the theme of the androgyne, suggests an interpretation consistent with this impulse in the late nineteenth century generally and in Khnopff's work in particular.

The theme of the incestuous liaison can be interpreted as the symbolic expression for the synthesis of the self with the (inner) other, the 'lost' half of one's self, which constitutes an identity with the subject, and which reconstitutes the state of original wholeness - the androgyne. As will be discussed in the following section, this desire for union with the inner or kindred other is also expressed in Symbolist art through the image of the reflection and the mirror. From the point of view of the male, incest signifies the union with the 'inner' feminine, the sister, to form a spiritual whole. Francine-Claire Legrand has suggested that Khnopff's devotion to Marguerite was based on her role as Symbolist Sister, - as the other half with whom Khnopff identified and formed a spiritual union.⁴⁰⁹ She was, Legrand states, 'the other half within whom this Narcissus found his delight'.⁴¹⁰ That this may be the case is perhaps further indicated by Khnopff's contemporary, Jean Delville, who

⁴⁰⁸ Howe asserts that:

As to the probability of an incestuous relationship between them [Khnopff and Marguerite] as the foundation for Khnopff's devotion, certainly one need not postulate such a relationship to explain Khnopff's repeated homage. No concrete evidence supports such a hypothesis, although the climate of Decadence fosters such theories.

Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁴⁰⁹ Olander, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁴¹⁰ Francine-Claire Legrand, *Symbolism in Belgium*, Brussels, 1972, p. 71. Quoted in Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

observed the purely idealistic nature of the woman Khnopff represented based on his sister:

Khnopff has created a type of ideal woman. Are they really women? Are they not rather imaginary femininities? They partake, at the same time, of the Idol, of the Chimera, of the Sphinx and of the Saint. They are rather plastic androgynes, subtle symbols, conceived according to an abstract idea and rendered visible... It is true, they resemble each other like sisters. They are daughters conceived, not from the same flesh, but from the same brain, that of the artist who created them in the mystery of his parturitions of his dream of beauty.⁴¹¹

This paper suggests that the motif of incest suggested in Khnopff's work, and particularly *The Caresses*, has more to do with a general impulse towards the desire for wholeness through the union of opposites than the expression of an illicit sexual desire. Thus the ambiguity of the facial features in this work and their resemblance to Khnopff's sister could at once represent a narcissistic self-identity, as suggested by Olander, and an identity with the other missing feminine half that makes up the totality of being. Paglia has stressed that this is a central aspect of the motif of incest in the context of the symbol of the androgyne:

Romantic practitioners of incest are always brother-sister pairs. From this significant fact, it seems clear that in the romantic interest in incest we may see the *androgynous impulse*; the desire for the imaginative apprehension of an exact duplicate of oneself, which has been artfully altered so as to reveal, as in a magic mirror,⁴¹² the lineaments of one's suppressed sexual component.

The idea of the integration of the lost feminine half, resulting in a return to the original androgynous state, is a theme common to the dynamic of androgyny and occurs, for instance, in Plato's

⁴¹¹ Jean Delville, 'Fernand Khnopff', *Annuaire de l'Academie*, Brussels, 1921, p. 19. Quoted in Howe, *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴¹² Paglia, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

account of the androgyne (already discussed) as well as in the writings of the German mystic Jacob Boehme whose work had widespread influence on Symbolist theory.⁴¹³ According to Boehme, the androgyne is seen to represent the objective of the union between the love of a man and woman, for by joining with woman man attempts to regain his former androgyny. Furthermore, it is in woman that he hopes to find the divine virgin, his lost feminine half, the divine image which has become effaced in him. Boehme states:

it is the divine inclination, and continually seeketh the virgin, (which is) its playfellow: the masculine seeketh her in the feminine, and the feminine seeketh her in the masculine... from which cometh the great desire for the masculine and feminine sex, so they always desire to copulate...⁴¹⁴

It may be further noted that the theme of brother-sister incest is a common motif in alchemy as a symbol of the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the union of opposites leading to the *lapis philosophorum* which symbolises the final transformed state of androgynous perfection and wholeness. This state is also represented symbolically in the image of the *Rebis*, a half male, half female being in alchemical imagery. The philosophy of alchemy, too, enjoyed a widespread vogue during the *fin-de-*

⁴¹³ According to Howe, *vide op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁴¹⁴ Jacob Boehme, *Concerning the Three Principles of the Divine Essence*, pp. 13 and 39. Translated by John Sparrow, London, 1910, p. 243. Quoted in Busst, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

siècle.⁴¹⁵ With regard to an alchemical interpretation of the incest motif in Khnopff's work, Howe suggests that:

it is possible to view his lifelong devotion to his sister not only as a narcissistic or incestuous desire, but as an alchemical quest to produce the androgyne from the *coniunctio oppositorum*, one of the first stages in the Great Work.⁴¹⁶

It should be emphasised, in concluding this section, that the theme of incest in late nineteenth-century art reflects various levels of involvement with the subject from an anecdotal dabbling with the erotic aspects of a forbidden desire, which would appeal to the anarchic sensibilities of Symbolists as a weapon to shock and disturb, to a more intense involvement with the ontological problem posed by the incest impulse as a symbolic expression for the attainment of the ideal state of wholeness expressed symbolically in the image of the androgyne.

⁴¹⁵ Mathews notes that:

By the Symbolist period, the implications of alchemy, along with occult doctrines, were as persistent as one's belief system as Freudian and Marxist theories are today, even among those who had never studied it.

Mathews, *op. cit.*, p. 26. Erick Starkie's work *Arthur Rimbaud* stresses the importance of alchemy and alchemical literature during the Symbolist period. *Vide* in Mathews, *ibid.*, p. 135. Paglia has noted the importance of alchemical sources in Romanticism from which the motif of brother-sister incest has been derived. *Vide* Paglia, *op. cit.*, p. 309. M. H. Abrams has observed in this regard that:

As a clue to one source of the Romantic theme of the symbolic love of brother and sister, it is noteworthy that in alchemy, on the grounds that the male and female opposites had a common genetic source, the *coniunctio* was often represented as a brother sister union.

M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, Norton, New York, 1971, p. 160.

⁴¹⁶ Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 56. Further, Howe observes that, 'Androgyny was more than just a fashionable theme for Khnopff... Marguerite was not only a representation of a sublimated desire, but she also mirrored his own inner wish to attain this ideal state'. Howe, *ibid.*, p. 142.

IV

Androgyny and the Mirror

The desire to reintegrate 'lost' or 'missing' aspects of one's being which would reconstitute the original whole and which would reflect a return to an original state of unity or androgyny - discussed in the context of the incest motif - occurs in another motif which was current during the Symbolist period, namely the mirror.

The reflection in the mirror could be argued to be symbolic of the 'replica' of the subject with whom the subject desires to unite to form an ontological unity. In as much as the integration of the lost feminine half, in the case of the incest motif, results in a state of completion or wholeness (androgyny), so, it is argued here, the desire for, or integration of the other in the reflection in a mirror would result in a similar condition. To this extent, the mirror can be seen as the medium through which this reunion is expressed and through which it occurs. Furthermore, it can also be seen as the medium through which these ontological polarities are revealed - i.e. the 'other' within, or the reflection of the inner unconscious self. The mirror can thus be understood to create a self-sufficient system between the subject and his or her 'reflex' and therefore could be seen to be an androgynous structure.

The mirror motif is particularly prevalent in the work of Khnopff.⁴¹⁷ One of Khnopff's most suggestive images which deals with the motif of the mirror is *Mon Coeur Pleur d'Autrefois*, (1888-89). The image represents a woman kissing her reflection

⁴¹⁷ Howe discusses the general iconography of the motif in Khnopff's work but makes no connection between it and the theme of androgyny. *Vide* Howe, *ibid.*, pp. 93-103.

in a mirror. This enigmatic motif could be interpreted, in the light of the above suggestions, as emblematic of the desire to form a union with the inner self symbolised by the reflection. In other words, it can be interpreted to represent a self-sufficient narcissistic union with the self. Howe has suggested that the image of the woman (Khnopff's sister) kissing herself stands as a symbol of 'the individual soul discovering itself and seeking its salvation only in itself'.⁴¹⁹ The relation between the reflection and the subject can therefore be seen as parallel in meaning to the relationship between the subject and the inner feminine representation discussed above with regard to the theme of incest. The desire for the union with the reflection would, in the same way, represent the desire for completion and hence androgyny. Péladan held the view that the integration of the feminine leads to man's progress towards consciousness - or individuation, in other words, spiritual evolution. In this regard, the feminine is seen as the reflex, or polar image of the male through which transformation is possible. Péladan expressed his ideas in the language of the occult tradition in the image of Adam and Eve representing respectively the constructs of the eternal masculine and eternal feminine. Péladan's view of initial creation and evolution of humanity rests on the idea that the evolution of consciousness comes about through the integration of the contrasexual component of one's consciousness through the realisation that this is a part of oneself through which spiritual evolution is possible:

Dès que la femme se révèle, comme une nouvelle personne, Adam la reconnaît pour sa moitié, il précise sa mission de réflexe et de complémentaire. Il sait qu'elle sort de lui; il exulte d'être ainsi dédoublé. Il vit, car il désire; il vit car il aime. Qui? Lui-même encore, puisqu'Eve est une moitié de lui-même.
Le puceau, à la vue de la jeune fille, s'écrie aussi: 'Voilà le réflexe de ma sensibilité et la forme

⁴¹⁹ Howe, *ibid.*, p. 99.

qui correspond à ma forme', et plus moderne il dirait: voilà le moyen de mon évolution, et le thème initial de ma conscience.⁴¹⁹

Many of Khnopff's images of the feminine are framed in a tondo format. This suggests the round mirror motif which frequently occurs in his work (notably in *I Lock my Door Upon Myself*). From the perspective of the viewer, the image of the feminine in these works could suggest the mirror reflection of the viewer's feminine soul image. As images of contemplation, the 'objectification' of the feminine in these images could function as a catalyst in the process of integration.

V

Androgyny and the Image of the Blue Flower

So far the discussion on the androgyne in Khnopff's art has centred on *Art or the Caresses* and the issues and themes which relate to the subject of androgyny which emerge from this work. Another image by Khnopff which deals with the theme of the androgyne is *Des Yeux Bruns et une Fleur Bleue* [Fig. 46]. This work is typical of many of Khnopff's more intimate works which invite a contemplative approach and, as the present discussion will emphasise, is an enigmatic conflation of various motifs which are associated with the theme of androgyny. Khnopff's work depicts the head of a woman constructed in the syntax of the androgynous feminine with the characteristic emphasis on the strong jaw, heavy chin, straight nose and pursed, thin lips. The

⁴¹⁹ Joséph Péladan, *Amphithéâtre des sciences mortes: Comment on devient feé. Erotique*. Paris, 1893, p. 95. Quoted in A. J. L. Busst, 'The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century', *Romantic Mythologies*, Ian Fletcher (ed.), Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1967, p. 69.

head is framed in a golden orange tondo format which cuts the head just above the eyebrows. The circularity of the format is emphasised by two thin circles surrounding the frame. Below the chin of the figure is a glass chalice containing a blue flower. The title of the work draws attention to the blue flower and the brown eyes of the figure which would suggest that these two features are significant - perhaps even related in some way.

The blue flower was a common image amongst Romantic writers and was, on the whole, symbolic of the nostalgic yearning for a lost age, a 'cosmic paradise'. Moreover, it referred to a Golden age of original harmony, wholeness and spiritual integration.⁴²⁰ The image of the blue flower is especially present in the work of Novalis (Friedrich Leopold, Baron von Hardenberg, 1772-1801) and features especially in his work *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1799).

In fact, this work by Novalis features many motifs which are identical to those in Khnopff's image and this paper would suggest that *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* could have served as the iconographic source for *Des Yeux Bruns et une Fleur Bleue*.⁴²¹

Von Ofterdingen deals with the 'miraculous initiation' of the protagonist Heinrich.⁴²² The work opens with a striking evocation of the yearning and longing for the Blue Flower which

⁴²⁰ Vide Friedrichmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴²¹ None of the literature on Khnopff explores the relationship between Novalis' writings and Khnopff's paintings. However, of the German Romantic authors, the works of Novalis are generally recognised to have been widely influential during the Symbolist period. vide S. Braak, 'Novalis et le Symbolisme Français'. *Neophilologus*. Volume 7, pp. 243-258 and Feinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 5. and Ernst Leopold Stahl, 'The Genesis of Symbolist Theories in Germany'. *Modern Language Review*. Volume 41, 1946, pp. 306-317.

⁴²² Ralph Tymms, *German Romantic Literature*, Methuen and Company, London, 1955, p. 11.

is seen, moreover, as the symbolic expression of the final state of wholeness experienced by Heinrich after leaving his home town:

Henry left his father and his native city with sorrow in his heart. Now for the first time it became clear to him what separation means... his familiar world was torn from him and he was washed up as it were on a foreign shore... The magic flower was before him, and he gazed over into Thuringia, which he was first leaving, with the strange premonition that after long wandering he would return to his native land from distant regions towards which they were now travelling and hence with the feeling that it was really his native land he was approaching.⁴²³

The typical motif of unity, separation and reunion as well as the yearning for wholeness, which is present in this novel is, as already discussed above, specific to the symbol of the androgyne. This suggests that *von Ofterdingen* is a narrative centred on the principle of androgyny.⁴²⁴

Heinrich compares Matilde, with whom he falls in love, to the Blue Flower: in his initial dream of the Blue Flower, Heinrich notices a face in the calyx of the flower:

What most attracted him was a lovely blue flower growing at the edge of a well. Its large, glossy green leaves overshadowed him. The air was perfumed by the fragrance of the flowers of every hue, but he cared for none of them but the blue flower, at which he gazed in tender adoration. As he rose to examine it more closely, it seemed to move and change; the glossy leaves hung down by the stalk, and the blossom bent towards him; the petals slowly opened, and he saw a lovely tender face.⁴²⁵

Later, Heinrich recognises the face in the flower as being that of Matilde:

⁴²³ Novalis *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, translated by Pamela Hitty, New York, 1951, pp. 26-7. quoted in M. H. Abrams, *op. cit.*, p. 249. All other translations in this section taken from: Novalis, *Novalis: His Life, thought and Works*, selections in English and including *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, London, Stott, 1891.

⁴²⁴ *Vide* Abrams, *op. cit.*, for a discussion of this aspect of the novel.

⁴²⁵ Novalis, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

It recalls my strange dream. I feel just as I did when I saw the magic blue flower. What is the connection between Matilde and that blue flower? The face that I saw in the calyx was Matilde's...⁴²⁶

Moreover, what is most significant in relation to *Des Yeux Bruns et une Fleur Bleue* is that Matilde has brown eyes, 'Heinrich... looked admiringly at his partner. Eternal youth shone in her large brown eyes; her nose and brow were daintily fashioned; her face like a lily raised to meet the dawn...'⁴²⁷

The significant aspect of Novalis' novel is that the Blue Flower and Matilde are seen as synonymous and both hold the promise of reaching a state of original wholeness and androgyny. That Khnopff's work refers to Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is highly likely in so far as both the face of the androgyne-feminine and the blue flower are the main focus of the image - which is reinforced in the title of Khnopff's work itself and which is also the focus of Novalis' work. That Matilde and the figure in the image both have brown eyes (the colour of the eyes is emphasised in the title of Khnopff's image) strongly suggests a connection between the two works.

The significance of the Blue Flower as a symbol of the androgynous state is quite suggestive in relation to the theme of this chapter. As has already been indicated, Friedrichmeyer has suggested that the image refers to the fall of man from the primeval Golden age - a condition of original wholeness - and his yearning for its return. The motif of the Blue Flower can therefore be interpreted as an image that refers to a yearning

⁴²⁶ Novalis, *ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴²⁷ Novalis, *ibid.*, p. 161.

for original unity and wholeness.⁴²⁹ Busst has suggested that, 'The famous 'blue flower' of *Heinrich of Ofterdingen* should itself be associated with the androgynous image'.⁴³⁰ Moreover, Busst makes a direct connection between the blue flower-androgyne and the alchemical hermaphrodite in commenting on the following lines from Novalis' work: 'Dear Matilde, let me compare you to a sapphire, clear and transparent as the sky and shedding the softest light'.⁴³¹ In the works of alchemy, one finds reference to the 'sapphire blue flower of the hermaphrodite'.⁴³¹ The 'sapphire' coloured frame around Khnopff's image is quite suggestive in view of this association.

A final motif in this work by Khnopff which relates to the theme of androgyny is the circle. This is evident in the round tondo format of the work which is outlined twice with two thin circles. The motif of the circle has already been discussed in the chapter on the Ideal Feminine where it was suggested that the circle signified the idea of wholeness and self-contained original unity. In the present context, the symbol of the circle is qualitatively similar but is, moreover, seen as a traditional motif associated with the theme of androgyny. Plato, it will be recalled from the above discussion, describes the original

⁴²⁹ Friedrichmeyer (*op. cit.*) discusses extensively the theme of the androgyne in the work of Novalis as does Busst who sees the androgyne as situated at the very heart of Novalis' philosophy. Busst, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-67 analyses the significance of the image in Novalis' writings.

⁴³⁰ Busst, *ibid.*, p. 66.

⁴³¹ Novalis *op. cit.* p. 124.

⁴³¹ *Theatrum Chemicum, Argentorati, Strasbourg, volume V, 1622, chapter XXIX, pp. 893-900. Quoted in C. G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, in Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Routledge and Kegan Paul, volume 12, p. 77. Quoted in Busst, op. cit., p. 66. Cf. also Marie Delcourt, 'Né dans l'alémbic ou sortant de la fleur mystique, ou encore du saphir bleu du l'hermaphrodite, Mecure représenté excellemment l'androgyne des alchimistes'. *Hermaphrodite. Mythes et Rites de la Bisexualité dans l'Antiquité classique*, Paris, 1958, p. 127. Quoted in Busst, *op. cit.*, p. 92.*

hermaphroditic beings as circular in shape.⁴³² Furthermore, the theme of the circle in relation to the notion of original unity or androgyny, is also present in the works of Plotinus. The theme of the circle is associated with the notion of Original Unity which is fundamental to the Plotinian cosmology. The idea of unity is, as has been emphasised in this chapter, closely associated with the symbol of the androgyne and the principle of androgyny. Plotinus maintained that the highest state of existence is that of unity: 'It is in virtue of unity that beings are beings'.⁴³³ Plotinus contends further, that man's essence is unity, 'Real Being would coincide with Unity. Thus, if Essential Being is the Intellectual-Principle, Unity also is the Intellectual-Principle which is at once primal being and Pure Unity'.⁴³⁴ Plotinus describes this unity as the centre inscribed by a circle that is formed by the movement of the soul towards it resulting eventually in the experience of unity which is opposed to the experience of duality encountered in the material and physical world:

Every soul that knows its history is aware also, that its movement, unthwarted, is not that of an ongoing line; its natural course may be likened to that in which a circle turns not upon some external but upon its own centre, the point to which it owes its rise. The soul's movement will be about its source; to this it will hold, poised intent towards that unity to which all souls should move and the divine souls always move, divine in virtue of that movement; for to be a god is integral with the Supreme; what stands away is man still multiple or beast.⁴³⁵

This unity is seen as the essential nature of the soul experienced as a circle (mandala):

The soul is... a circle in the sense... that its primal nature (wholeness) is within and about it, that

⁴³² *Vide supra.*

⁴³³ Plotinus, *Enneads, op. cit., VI, ix, 1.*

⁴³⁴ *Ibid., VI, ix, 2*

⁴³⁵ *Enneads, VI, ix, 8.*

it owes its origin to what is whole, and that it will be still more entire when severed from the body.⁴³⁵

The conflation of the androgynous-feminine with other motifs peculiar to the symbol of the androgyne such as the Blue Flower and the circle in Khnopff's *Des Yeux Bruns* creates an interesting contrapuntal effect with these various motifs which echo each other in a semantic harmony around the theme of the androgyne. As with many of Khnopff's images, and most of the art of the Symbolist epoch, the meaning of this work is ultimately elusive and suggestive. The work evades a categorical interpretation based on conventional iconography and, therefore, as with many of Khnopff's other paintings dealing with the (mythic) feminine, this work could be read as an object of contemplation, rather than an image having a set iconographic meaning.

The image of the androgyne in the art of the Symbolists, it can be stated from the above discussion, is a complex symbol which personifies the highest aesthetic and ontological aspirations of Symbolist culture. The notion of androgyny is expressed in various ways: in the image of the androgyne - the figure of indeterminate gender which expresses the union of the sexes and hence expresses the idea of the synthesis of opposites; in the process of androgynisation characterised by a three-fold process beginning with an initial phase of unity followed by separation which leads to a final stage of original wholeness and unity; and in specific symbols which refer to the idea of or desire for wholeness and original unity, the key characteristic of the theme of androgyny, such as the theme of incest, and the mirror and circle motifs. These aspects of the subject have been discussed with specific regard to the work of Khnopff which cogently

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

articulate these ideas associated with the theme of the androgyne.

With regard to the general theme of this paper, it has been stressed that the symbol of the androgyne is intimately associated with the feminine in Symbolist culture, specifically in the writings of Péladan and in the art of Khnopff. The theme of androgyny is thus a vital aspect of the symbol of the feminine in *fin-de-siècle* art.

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III

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-ILLUSTRATIONS-

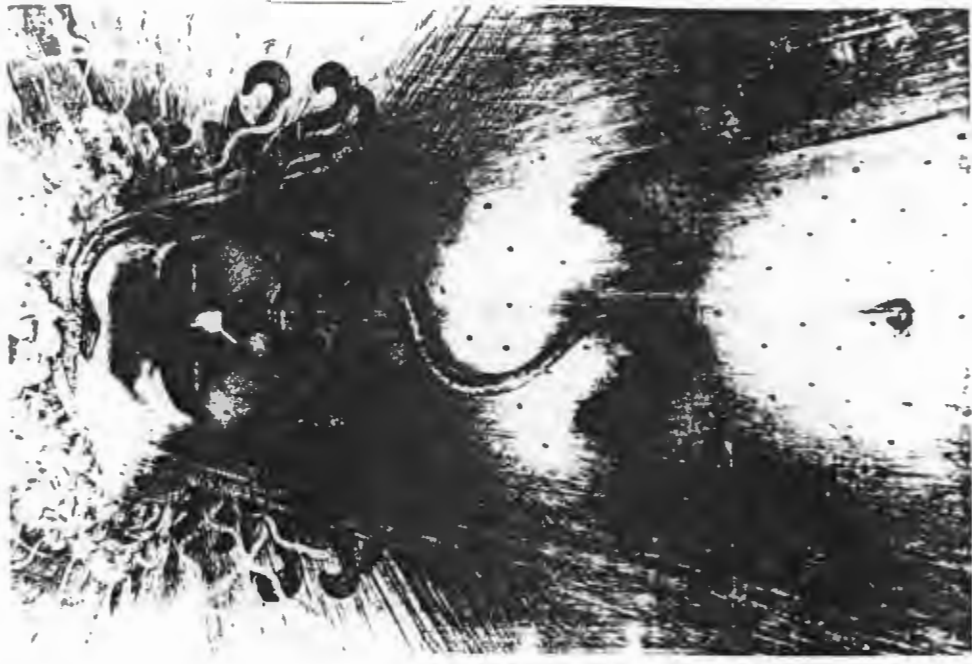


Figure 2

JEAN DELVILLE *Idol of Perversity* (1891)

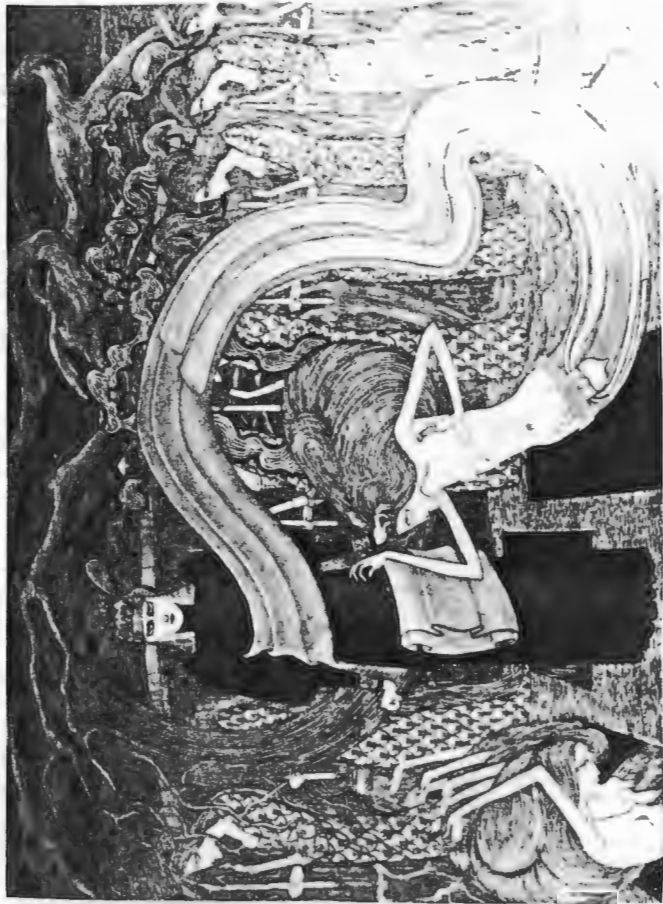


Figure 1

JAN TOOROP *Fate* (1893)

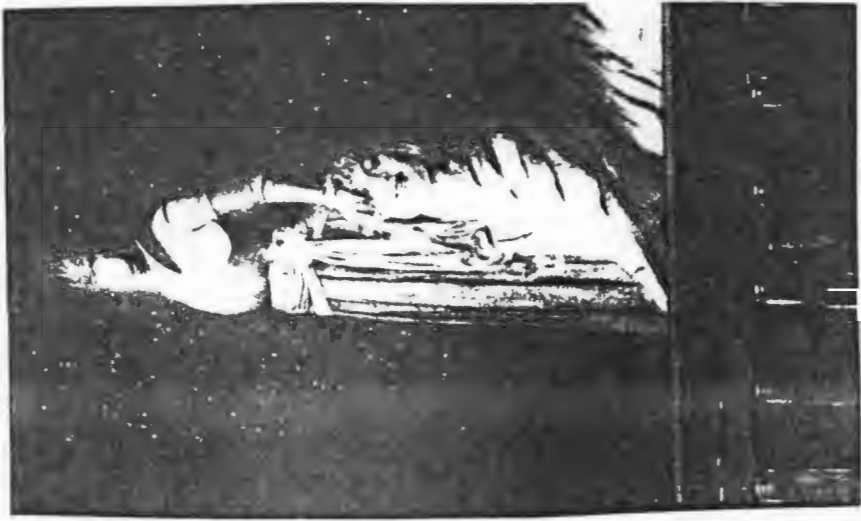


Figure 3

FERNAND KHNOFF *Un Ange* (1889)



Figure 4

LUCIEN LÉVY-DHURMER *Salome Embracing the Severed Head of John the Baptist* (1896)



Figure 5

FERNAND KHNOPFF *Who Shall Deliver Me?* (1891)



Figure 6

FERNAND KHNOPFF *I Lock my Door Upon Myself* (1891)



Figure 7

JAN TOOROP *The Three Brides* (1893)

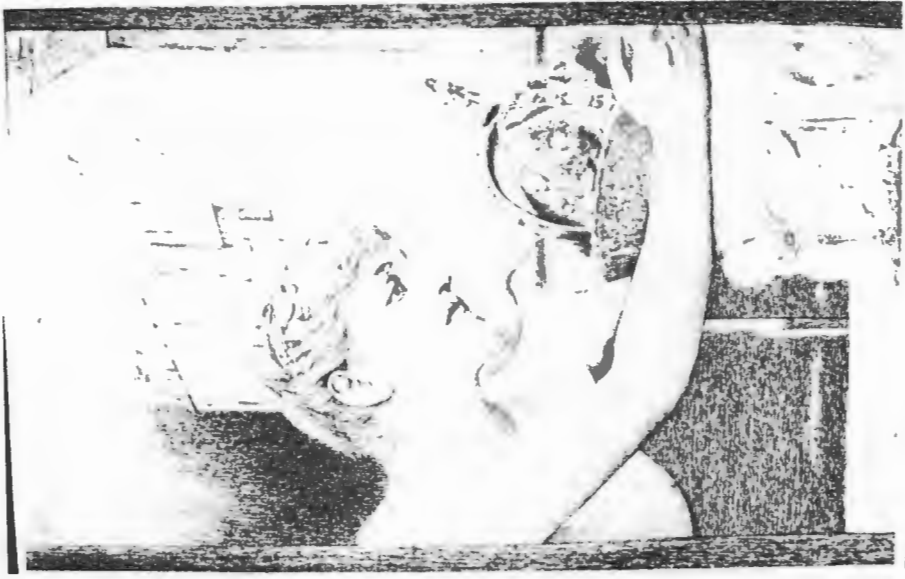


Figure 8

FERNAND KHNOPFF *Une Ville Morte* (1889)



Figure 9

FERNAND KHNOPEFF *Du Silence* (1890)



Figure 10

JEAN DELVILLE *Portrait of Mrs Stuart Merrill* (1892)

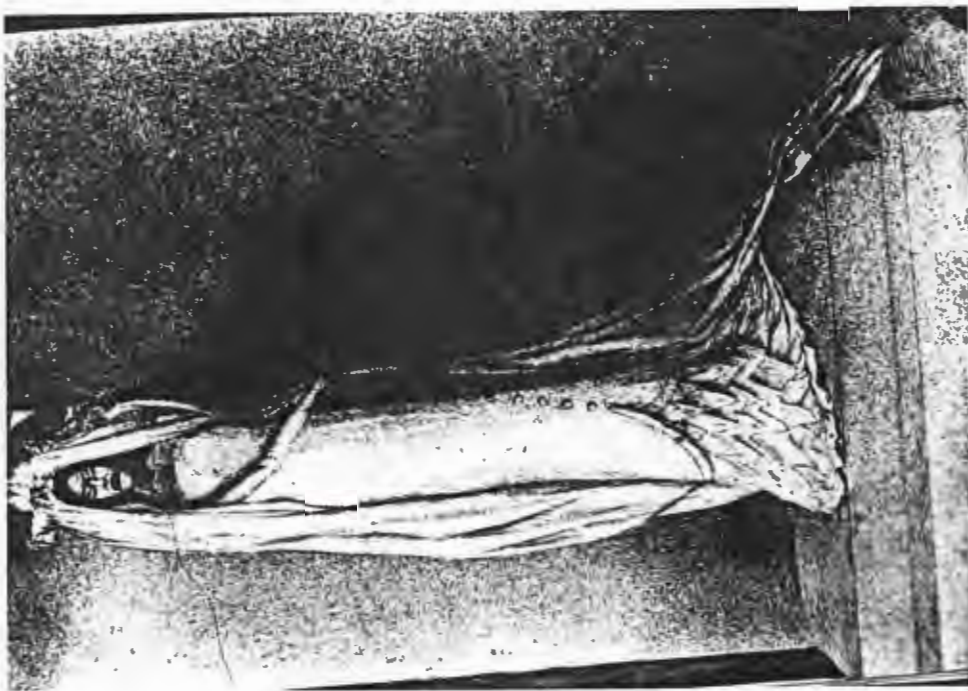


Figure 11

ALFRED KUBIN *The Bride of Death* (c. 1900)



Figure 12

FERNAND KHNOFFF *Art or the Caresses* (1896)

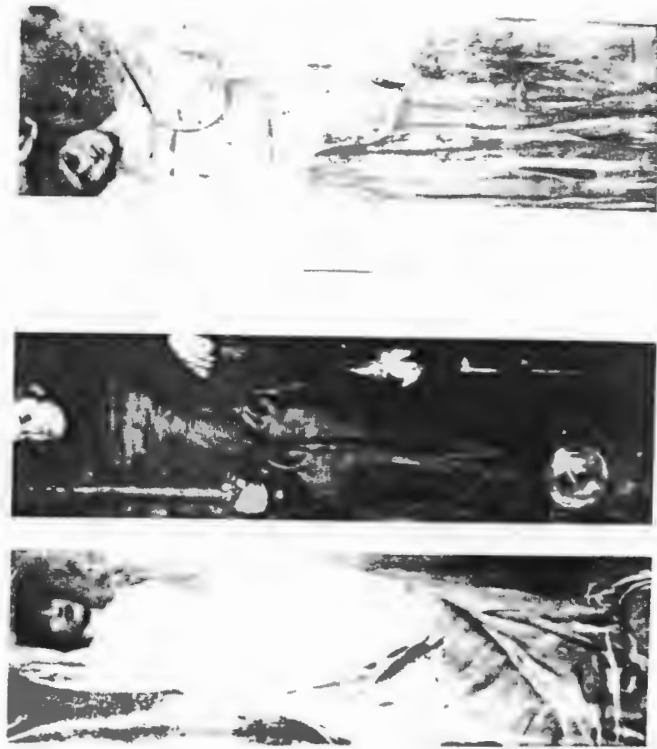


Figure 13

FERNAND KHNOFF *L'isolement* (1890-1894)

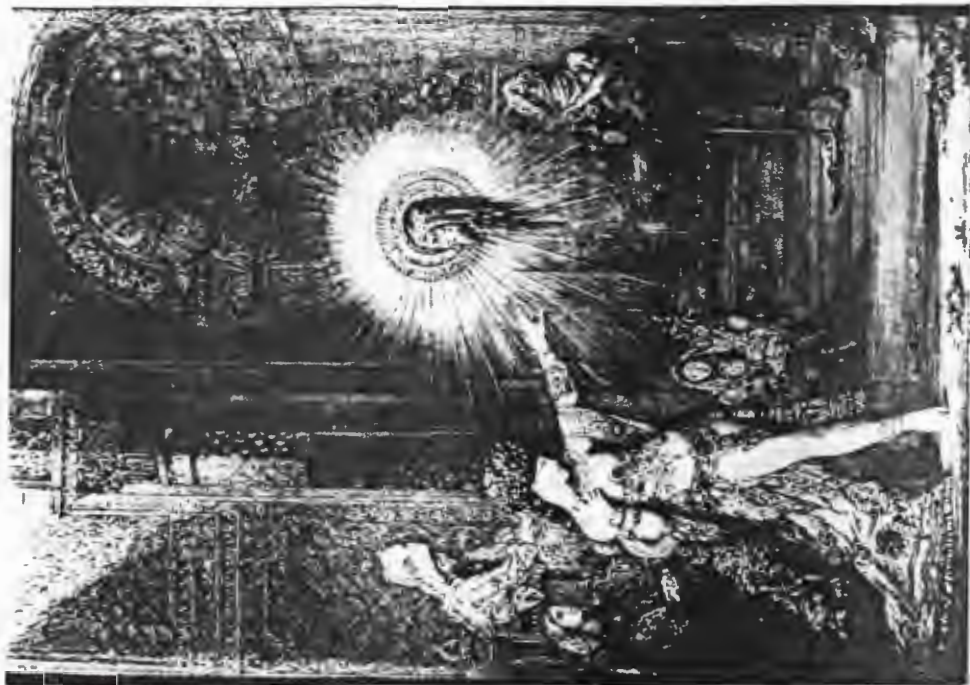


Figure 14

GUSTAVE MOREAU *The Apparition* (1876)

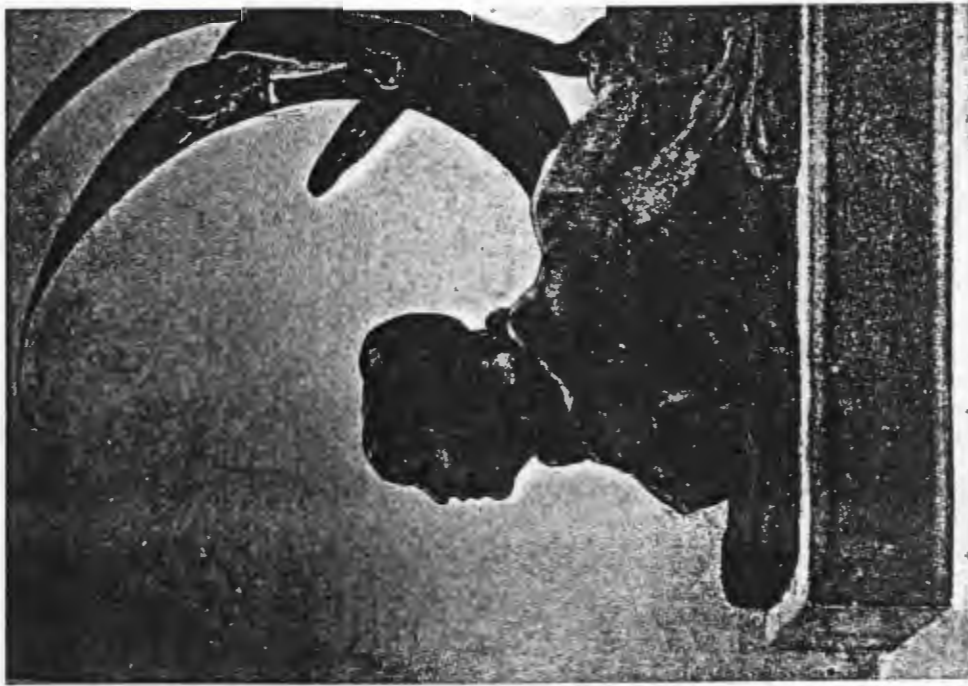


Figure 15

FÉLICIEN ROPS *The Sphinx* (1879)



Figure 16

FRANZ VON STUCK *The Sphinx* (1895)

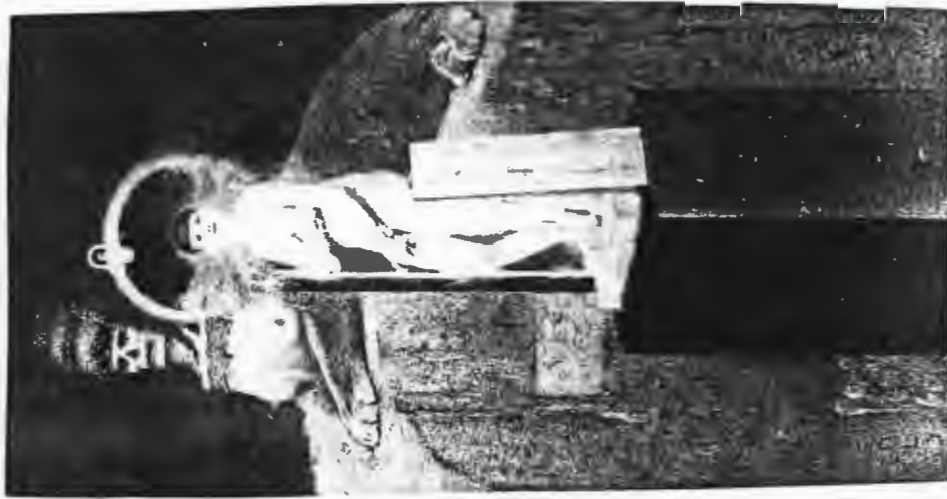


Figure 17

FERNAND KHNOPFF *La Sphinx* (1885)

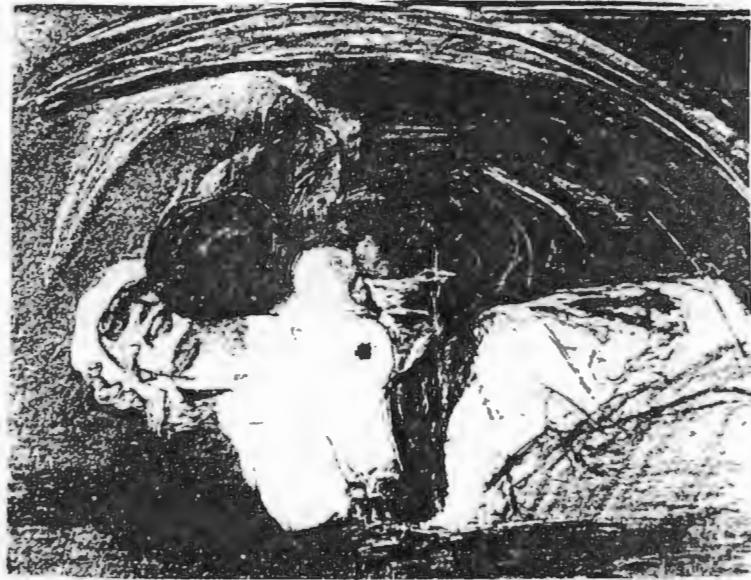


Figure 18

FÉLICIEN ROPS *Les Diables Froids* (n.d.)



Figure 19

FÉLICIE ROPS *La Dame et le Pantin* (1877)

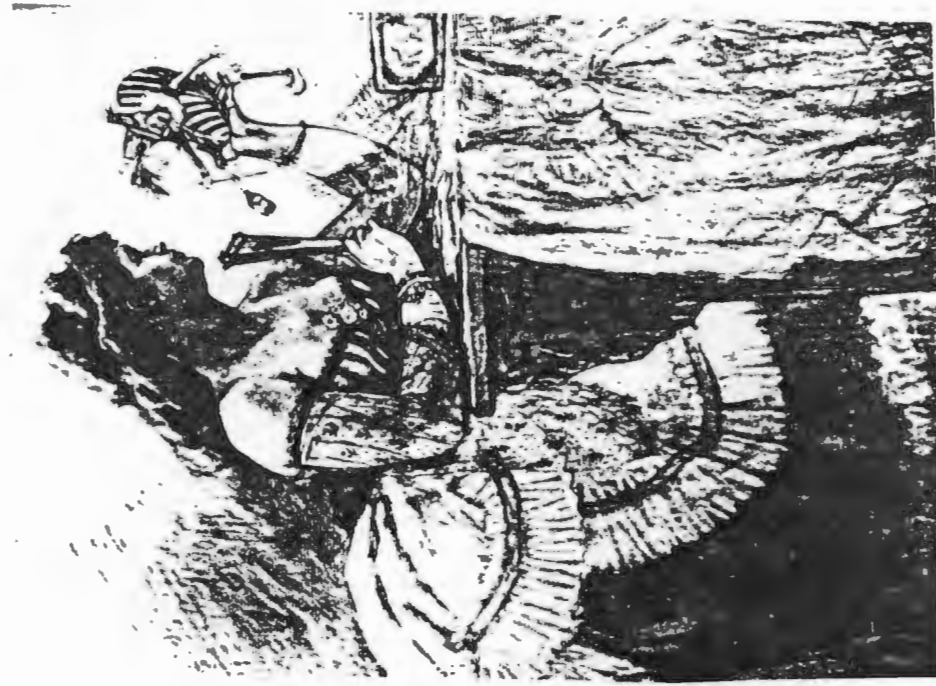


Figure 20

FÉLICIE ROPS *La Dame au pantin et l'éventail* (1873)



Figure 21

FÉLICIEN ROPS Satan semant l'ivraie (1883)

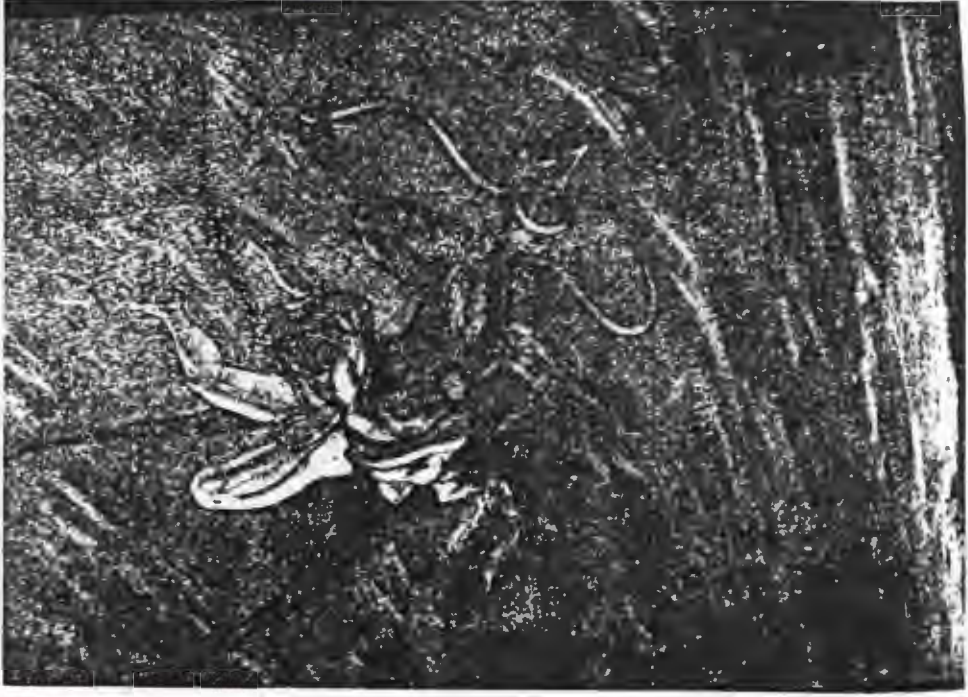


Figure 22

FÉLICIEN ROPS L'Enlèvement (1883)



Figure 24

FÉLICIEN ROPS *Le Sacrifice* (1883)

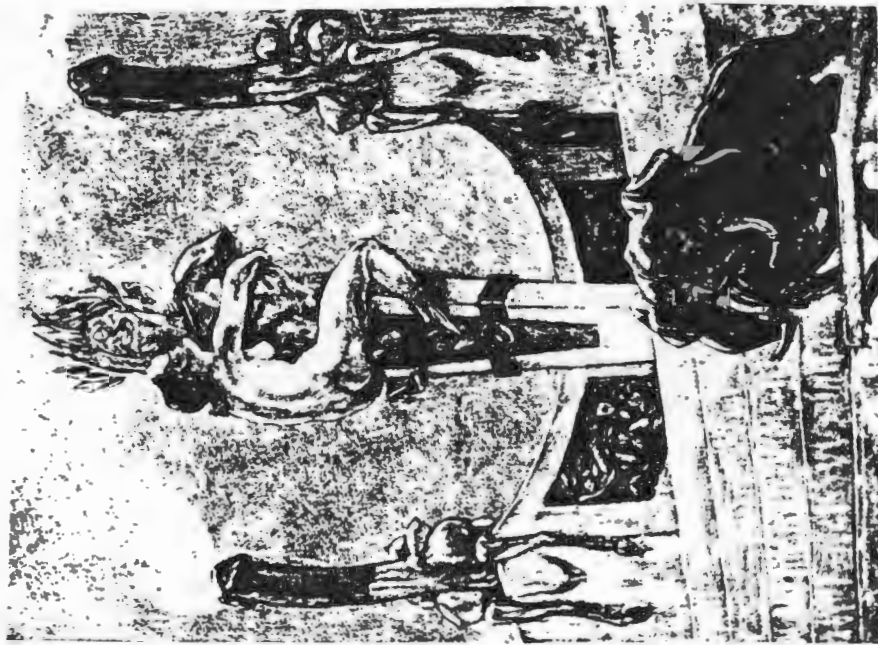


Figure 23

FÉLICIEN ROPS *L'Idole* (1883)

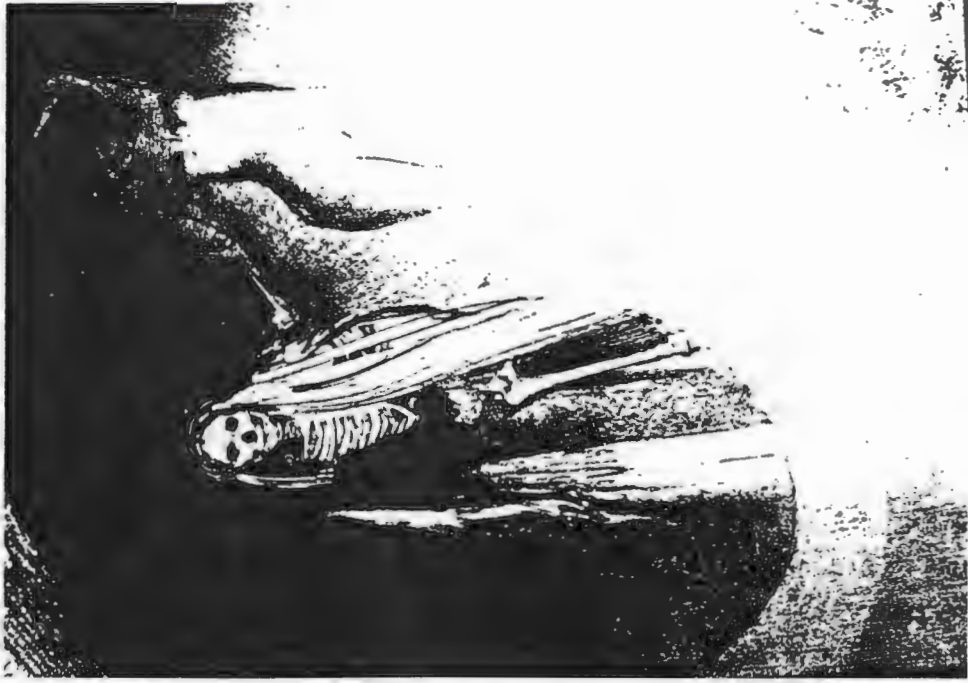


Figure 26

ODILON REDON 'Death I am the one...' (1896)

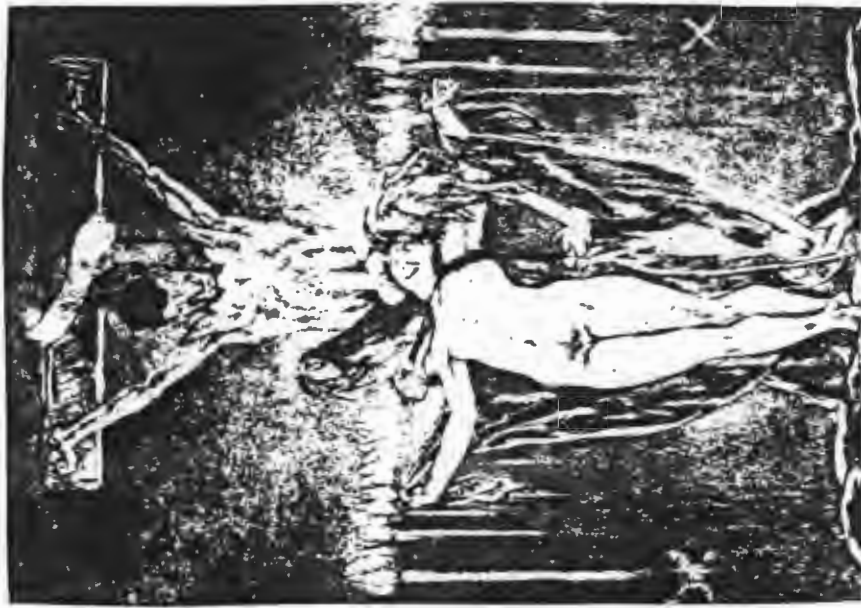


Figure 25

FÉLICIEN ROPS *Le Calvaire* (1883)



Figure 28

FÉLICIEN ROPS *La Mort au Bal* (c. 1865-1875)

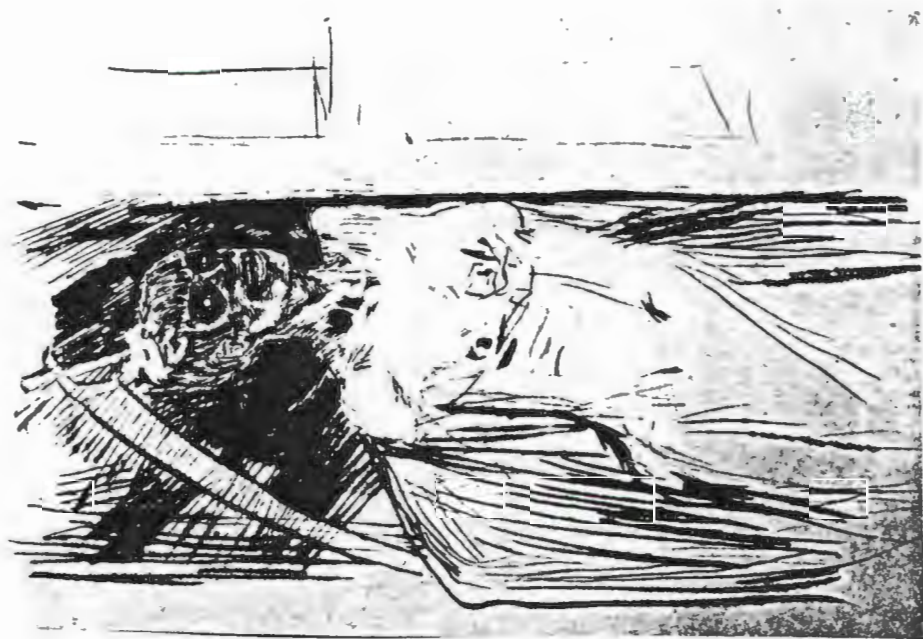


Figure 27

FÉLICIEN ROPS *Mors Syphilitica* (c. 1875)

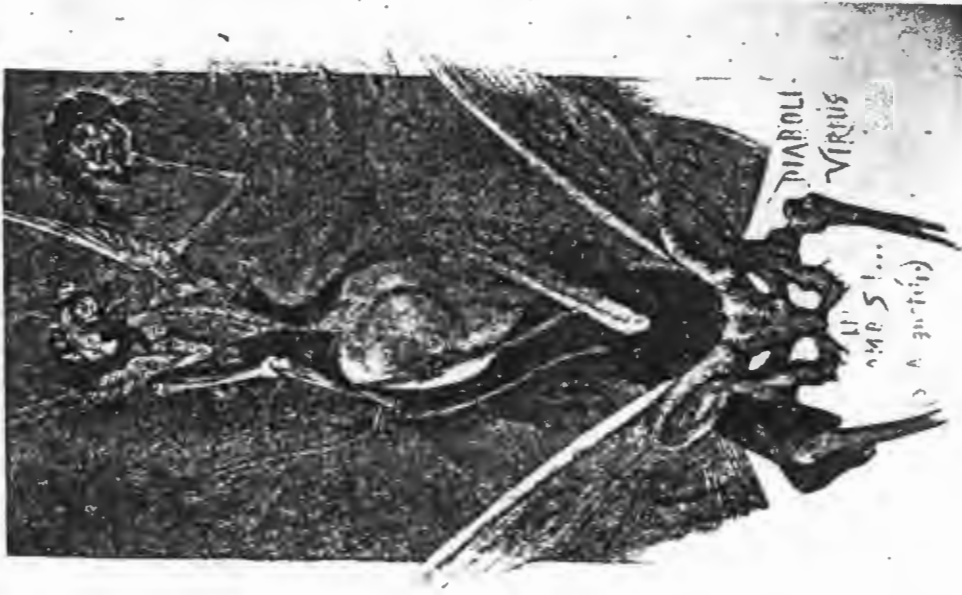


Figure 29

FÉLICIEN ROPS *Diaboli virtus* in *Iumbis* (1878-1881)



Figure 30

JEAN DELVILLE *Tristan und Isolde* (1887)



Figure 31

JEAN DELVILLE *Angel of Splendour* (1894)



Figure 32

FERNAND KHNOPFF *The Veil* (c. 1890)

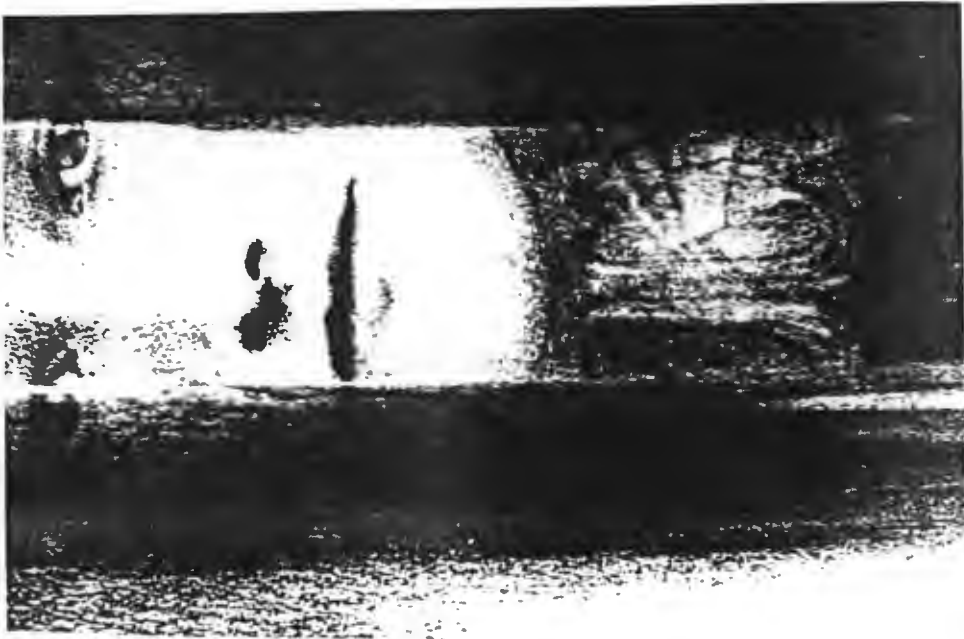


Figure 33

FERNAND KHNOPFF *The Blue Veil* (1909)



Figure 34

FERNAND KHNOPFF *Un Rideau Bleu* (1909)

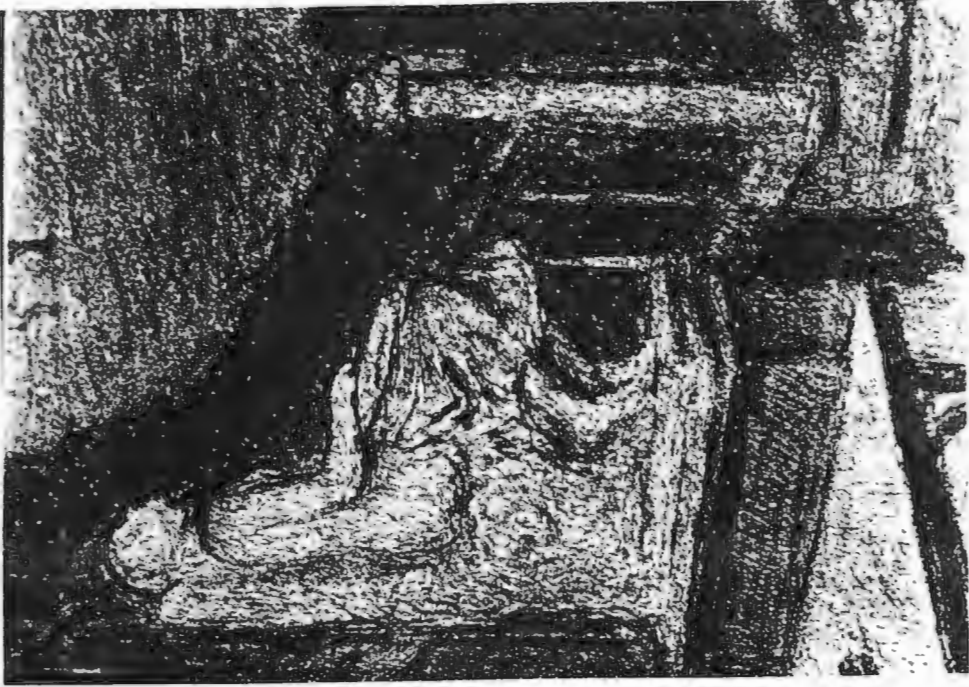


Figure 35

XAVIER MELLERY *The Dream of Evening* (1898)

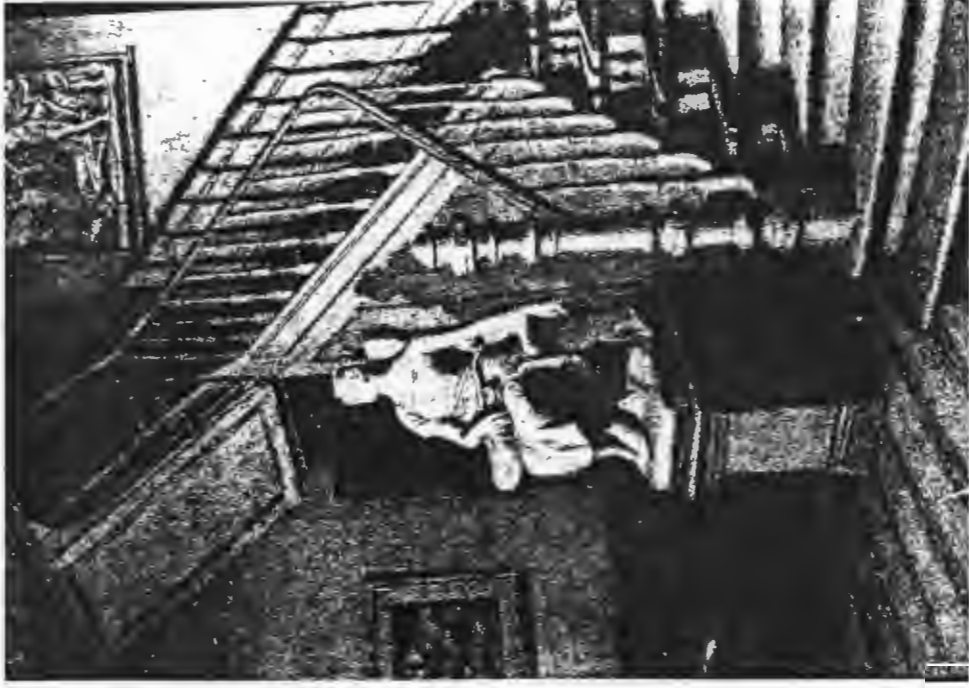


Figure 36

XAVIER MELLERY *The Soul of Things* (1890)

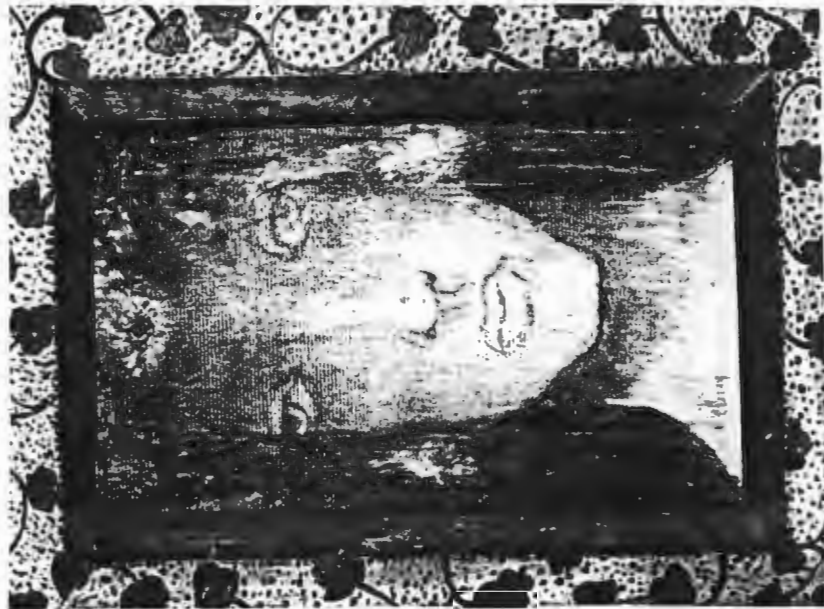


Figure 37

ODILON REDON *The Soul of Mystery* (1897)



Figure 38

ALPHONSE OSBERT *Hymn to the Sea* (1893)



Figure 39

ALPHONSE OSBERT *Classical Evening* (1908)

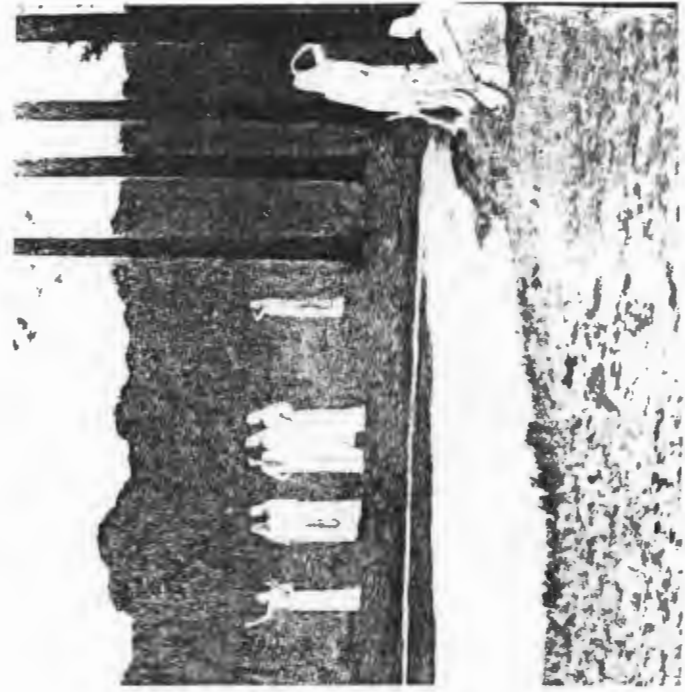


Figure 40

ALPHONSE OSBERT *Songs of the Night* (detail 1896)

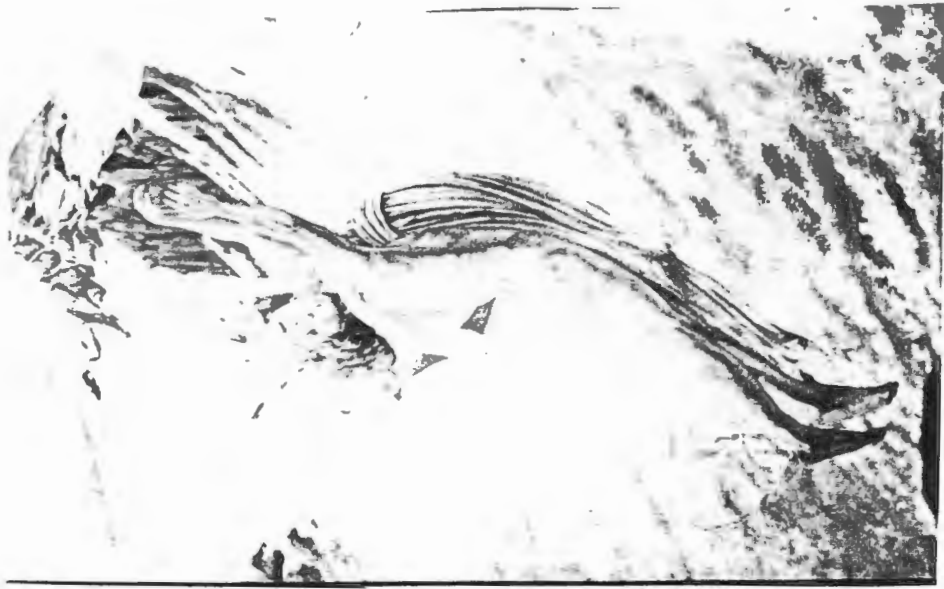


Figure 41

CARLOS SCHWABE *The Marriage of the Muse and the Poet* (1900)



Figure 42

FERNAND KHNOFF *The Idol* (1909)



Figure 43

GIOVANNI SEGANTINI *The Angel of Life* (1894)



Figure 44

GAETANO PREVIATI *Maternity* (n.d.)



Figure 45

MAURICE DENIS *The Muses* (1893)



Figure 46

FERNAND KHNOPFF *Des Yeux Bruns et Une Fleur Bleu* (1905)



Figure 47

FERNAND KHNOPFF *Mon Coeur Fleur d'Autrefois* (1888-89)



Figure 48

FERNAND KHNOPFF *Près de la Mer* (1890)



Figure 49

GUSTAVE MOREAU Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur (c. 1890)



Figure 50

GUSTAVE MOREAU The Arab or Persian Poet (1886)



Figure 51

SIMEON SOLOMON *Dawn* (1871)

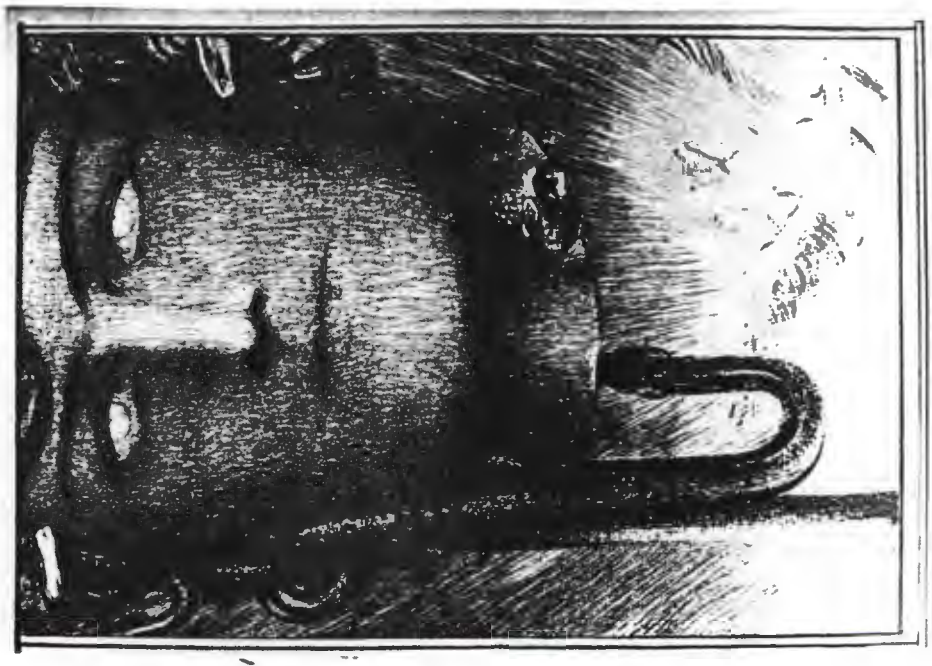


Figure 52

FERNAND KHNOPFF *The Blood of the Medusa* (n.d.)



Figure 53

FERNAND KHNOFFFF *Tête de Femme* (1899)



Figure 54

FERNAND KHNOFFFF *Memories* (1899)

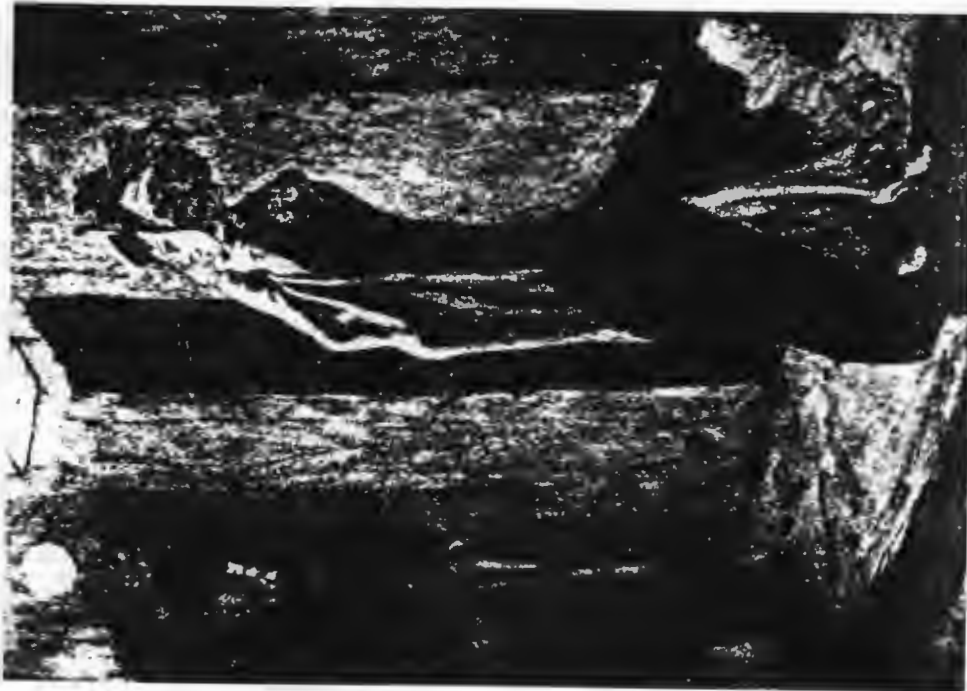


Figure 55

FÉLICIEN ROPS *Au coin de la rue* (1881)

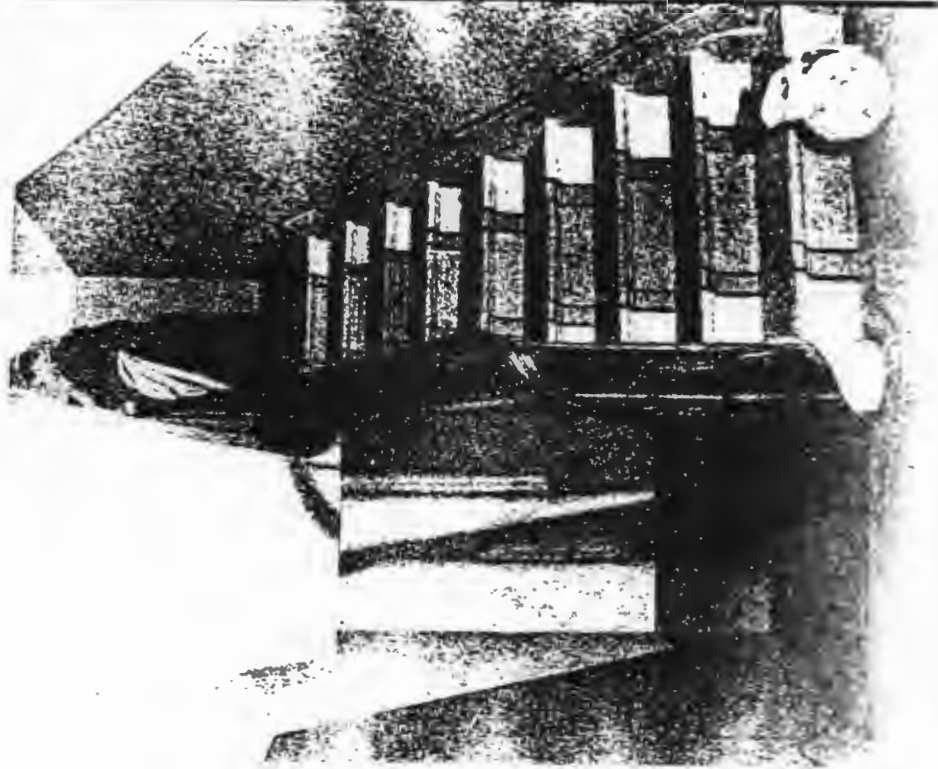


Figure 56

XAVIER MELLERY *The Staircase* (n.d.)